

JACK THE HUNCHBACK

BY

JAMES OTIS



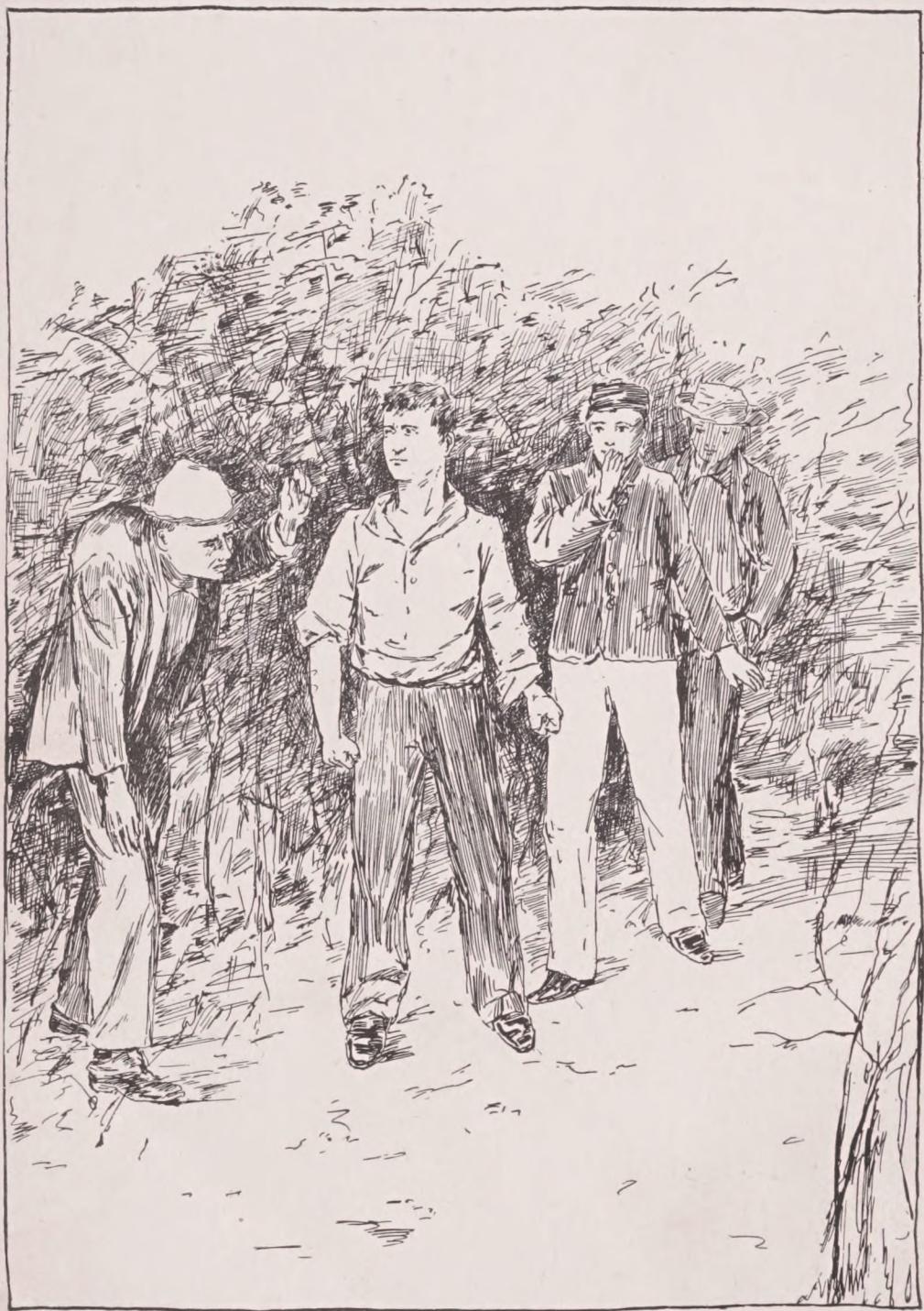
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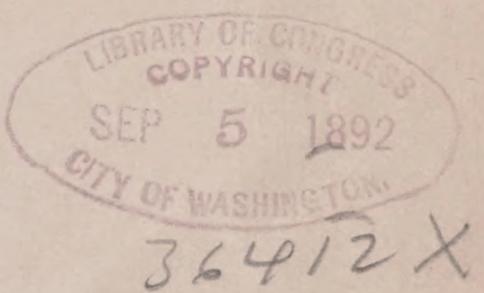


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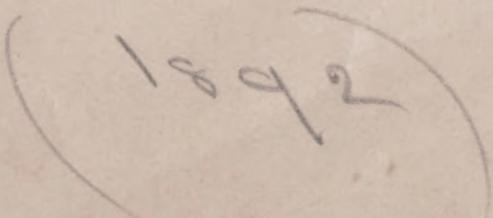
BY

JAMES OTIS,

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"SILENT PETE," "LITTLE JOE," "LEFT
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MAD
COOL

JACK THE HUNCHBACK.

CHAPTER I.

ADRIFT.

TOM PRATT firmly believed he was the most unfortunate boy in Maine when, on a certain June morning, his father sent him to the beach for a load of seaweed.

Tom had never been in love with a farmer's life.

He fancied that in any other sphere of action he could succeed, if not better, certainly more easily, than by weeding turnips or hoeing corn on the not very productive farm.

But either planting or digging was preferable to loading a huge cart with the provokingly slippery weeds which his father insisted on gathering for compost each summer.

Therefore, when the patient oxen, after much goading and an unusual amount of noise from their impatient driver, stood knee-deep in the surf contentedly chewing their cuds and enjoying the

cool footbath, Tom, instead of beginning his work, sat at the forward part of the cart gazing seaward, thinking, perhaps, how pleasant must be a sailor's life while the ocean was calm and smiling as on this particular day.

So deeply engrossed was he in idleness that his father's stern command from the hillside a short distance away, "to 'tend to his work an' stop moonin'," passed unheeded, and the same ox-goad he had been using might have been applied to his own body but for the fact that just as Farmer Pratt came within striking distance a tiny speck on the water attracted his attention.

"It looks to me as if that might be a lapstreak boat out there, Tommy. Can you see anybody in her?"

"I reckon that's what it is, father, an' she must be adrift."

Farmer Pratt mounted the cart and scrutinized the approaching object until there could no longer be any question as to what it was, when Tom said gleefully,—

"It must be a ship's boat, an' if she hasn't got a crew aboard, we'll make a bigger haul than we could by cartin' seaweed for a week."

"Yes, them kind cost more'n a dory," the farmer replied dreamily, as he mentally calculated the

amount of money for which she might be sold. "I reckon we'll take her into Portland an' get a tidy—"

"I can see a feller's head!" Tom interrupted, "an' it shets off our chance of sellin' her."

That the boat had an occupant was evident.

A closely shaven crown appeared above the stem as if its owner had but just awakened, and was peering out to see where his voyage was about to end.

Nearer and nearer the little craft drifted until she was dancing on the shore line of the surf, and the figure in the bow gazed as intently landward as the farmer and his son did seaward.

"It's a boy, father, an' he ain't as big as me!" Tom cried. "Well, that beats anything I ever saw!"

This last remark probably referred to the general appearance of the young voyager.

He was an odd-looking little fellow, with a head which seemed unusually small because the hair was closely cropped, and a bent, misshapen body several sizes too large for the thin legs which barely raised it above the gunwales. The face was by no means beautiful, but the expression of anxiety and fear caused it to appeal directly to Tom's heart, if not to his father's.

Farmer Pratt was not pleased at thus learning that the boat had an occupant.

Empty, she would have been a source of profit; but although there was apparently no one save the deformed lad aboard, he could make no legal claim upon her.

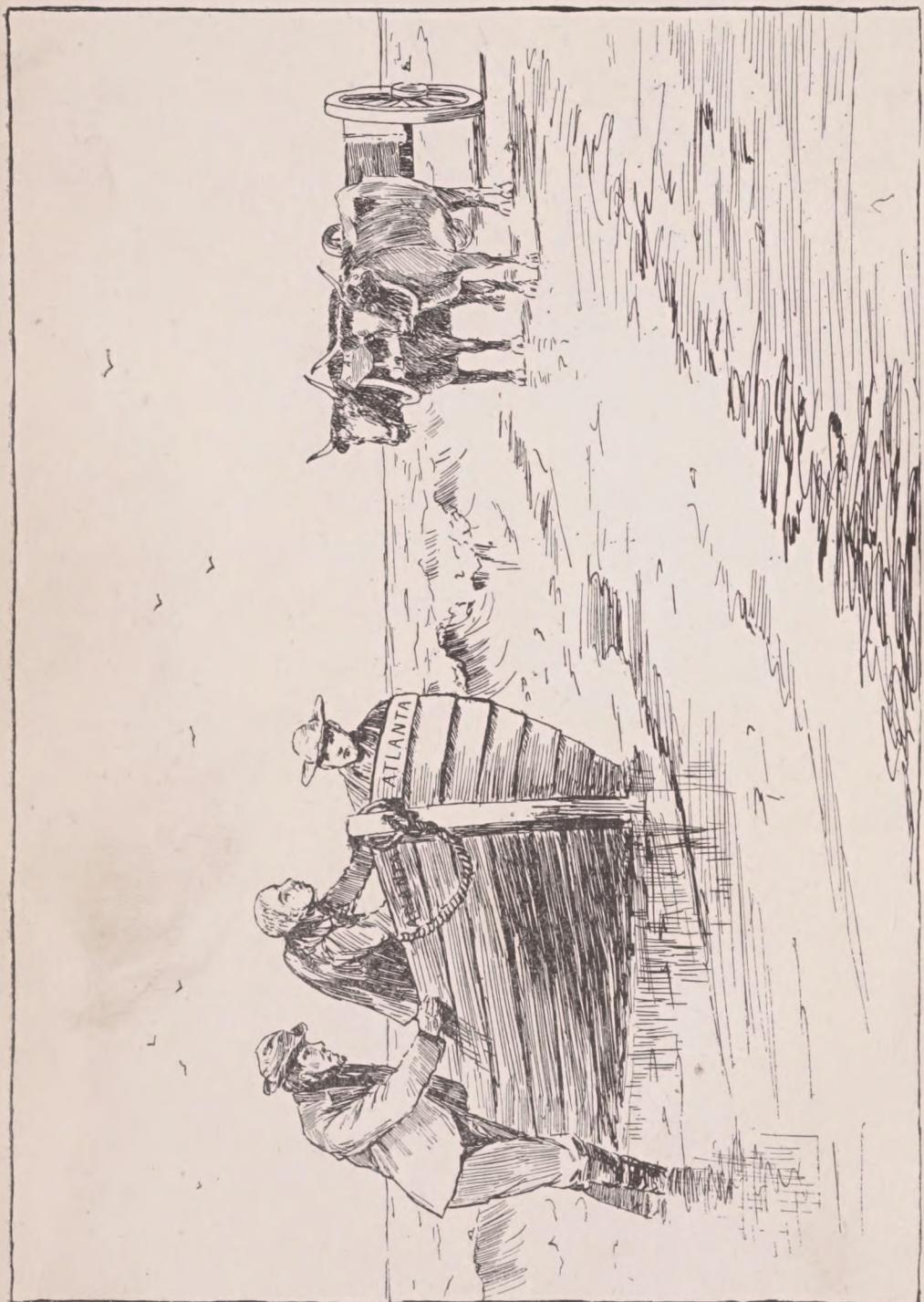
The craft was there, however, and would speedily be overturned unless he waded out into the surf at the risk of a rheumatic attack, to pull her inshore.

Although decidedly averse to performing any charitable deed, he did this without very much grumbling, and Tom was a most willing assistant.

That which had come out of the east on this bright June morning was a ship's lifeboat about eighteen feet long, and with the name "Atlanta" painted on the gunwales.

She was a much more valuable craft than Mr. Pratt had ever seen ashore on Scarborough beach, and yet he failed to calculate her value immediately, because as the bow grated on the sand the misshapen boy, from whose white lips not a word had escaped during all this time, suddenly lifted what at first appeared to be a bundle of cloth.

This act in itself would not have caused any surprise, but at the same moment a familiar noise was heard from beneath the coverings.



Farmer Pratt stepped back quickly in genuine alarm and wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt as he exclaimed,—

“Well, this beats anything I ever seen!”

“It’s a baby, father!” Tom cried, starting forward to take the burden from the crooked little sailor’s arms; but the latter retreated as if afraid the child was to be carried away, and the farmer replied testily,—

“Of course it’s a baby. Haven’t I heard you cry often enough to know that?”

“But how did it come here?”

“That’s what beats me”; and then, as if suddenly realizing that the apparent mystery might be readily solved, he asked the stranger, “Where did you come from, sonny?”

“From Savannah.”

“Sho! Why, that’s way down in Georgy. You didn’t sail them many miles in this ’ere little boat?”

“No, sir. We broke adrift from Captain Littlefield’s ship yesterday when she blowed up, an’ the baby’s awful hungry.”

“Ship blowed up, eh? Whereabouts was she?”

“Out there”; and the boy pointed eastward in an undecided manner, as if not exactly certain where he had come from.

"What made her blow up?" Tom asked curiously.

"I don't know. There was an awful splosion like more'n a hundred bunches of firecrackers, an' the captain put Louis an' me in the lifeboat to wait till his wife got some things from the cabin. While all the sailors was runnin' 'round wild like, we got adrift. I hollered an' hollered, but nobody saw us." Then he added in a lower tone, "Louis cried last night for somethin' to eat, an' he must be pretty hungry now."

"Well, well, well!" and as the thought of whether he would be paid for the trouble of pulling the boat ashore came into the farmer's mind, he said quickly, "'Cordin' to that you don't own this boat?'"

"She belongs to the ship."

"An' seein's how the vessel ain't anywhere near, I reckon I've as much right to this craft as anybody else. Where do you count on goin'?"

"If we could only get back to New York I'm sure I would be able to find the captain's house."

"It's a powerful long ways from here, sonny; but I'll see that you are put in a comfortable place till somethin' can be done. What's your name?"

"John W. Dudley; but everybody calls me

Jack, an' this is Louis Littlefield," the boy replied as he removed the coverings, exposing to view a child about two years old.

Master Tom was delighted with the appearance of the little pink and white stranger, who was dressed in cambric and lace, with a thin gold chain around his neck, and would have shaken hands with him then and there if Jack had not stepped quickly back as he said,—

"He's afraid of folks he don't know, an' if you get him to cryin' I'll have a worse time than last night. What he wants is somethin' to eat."

"Take 'em right up to the house, Tommy, an' tell mother to give them breakfast. When I get the boat hauled around (for I've got every reason to consider her mine), I'll carry both out to Thornton's."

Jack clambered from the craft, disdaining Tom's assistance, and, taking the child in his arms, much as a small cat might carry a very large kitten, stood waiting for his guide to lead the way.

Farmer Pratt's son was in no especial hurry to reach home, for while escorting the strangers he certainly could not be expected to shovel seaweed, and Jack said as Tom walked leisurely over the hot sand,—

"If you don't go faster, the baby'll begin to cry, for he's pretty near starved."

"Why not let him walk? He's big enough; his legs are twice as large as Mrs. Libby's baby, an' he went alone a good while ago."

"I'd rather carry him," Jack replied; and then he refused to enter into any conversation until they were at the foot of the narrow, shady lane leading to the house, when he asked, "Who's Mr. Thornton?"

"He keeps the poor farm, an' father's goin' to take you out there."

"What for? We want to go to New York."

"Well, you see I don't reckon you'll get as far as that without a slat of money, an' father wants to put you fellers where you'll be took care of for a while."

Jack stopped suddenly, allowed the baby to slip from his arms under the shade of an apple-tree whose blossoms filled the air with perfume, as he said angrily,—

"Louis sha'n't be taken to the poorhouse! I'll walk my feet off before anybody but his mother shall get him."

"You couldn't go as far as New York, an' if he's so hungry you'd better let him have some bread an' milk."

"How long before your father'll be back?"

"It'll take him a couple of hours to carry the boat down to the Neck, an' that's the only place where she can lie without gettin' stove."

"Then we'll go into your house long enough to feed the baby, an' I'll leave before he comes."

"All right," and Tom took up the line of march once more. "I don't know as I blame you, for Thornton's ain't the nicest place that ever was, an' I'd rather haul seaweed for a month than stay there one night."

Jack looked wistfully at the little farmhouse with its beds of old maid's pinks and bachelor's buttons in front of the muslin-curtained windows, thinking, perhaps, that shelter should be given him there rather than among the town's paupers; but he made no remark, and a few moments later they were standing in the cool kitchen while Tom explained to his mother under what circumstances he had made the acquaintance of the strangers.

Mrs. Pratt was quite as economical as her husband; but the baby face touched her heart fully as much as did the fact that the boat in which the children had drifted ashore would amply repay any outlay in the way of food and shelter.

She accepted the statement made by Tom, that the children were to be sent to Thornton's,

because the town provided such an asylum, and there was no good reason, in her mind at least, why it should not be utilized in a case like this.

Thus, with the pleasing knowledge that her involuntary guests would remain but a short time and cost her nothing, she set out a plentiful supply of fresh milk and sweet home-made bread, as she said,—

“Fill yourselves right full, children, for it will rest you to eat, and after you’ve had a nice ride, Mrs. Thornton will give you a chance to sleep.”

Jack looked up quickly as if about to make an angry reply, and then, as little Louis went toward the table eagerly, he checked himself, devoting all his attention to the child by waiting until the latter had finished before he partook of as much as a spoonful.

Then he ate rapidly, and after emptying two bowls of milk, asked,—

“May I put some of the bread in my pocket?”

“Certainly, child; but it won’t be needed, for there is plenty to eat at Thornton’s, and most likely in a few days the selectmen will find some way to send word to the baby’s relatives.”

Jack put three slices of bread in his pocket before replying, and then, as with an effort he lifted Louis in his arms, said,—

"We're not goin' to the poor farm, ma'am. We are bound to get to New York, an' thank you for the bread an' milk."

Just at that moment Mrs. Pratt was intent on carrying the dishes from the table to the pantry, therefore she did not see the deformed boy leave the house quickly, Tom following close behind.

Jack heard her call after him to wait until Mr. Pratt should return; but he shook his head decidedly, and trudged out from the green-car-parted lane to the dusty road, bent only on saving his little charge from the ignominy of the poorhouse.

"Say, hold on for father!" Tom cried. "You can't walk even so far as Saco, an' where'll you sleep to-night?"

"I'd rather stay in the woods, an' so had Louis," Jack replied; and then in reply to the child's fretful cries, he added, "Don't fuss; I'll find your mother."

"But how can you do it if the ship has blowed up?" Tom asked, quickening his steps to keep pace with the deformed boy. "Perhaps mother'll let you sleep in my bed to-night, an' you won't have to go out to the poor farm."

"And then again she mightn't, so I guess we won't risk it."

“Have you got any money?”

“Not a cent.”

Tom halted irresolutely for a moment, and then his charitable impulses gained the mastery.

“Here’s half of what I’ve got, an’ I wish it was more.”

Involuntarily Jack extended his hand for the gift.

Four marbles were dropped into it, and then Tom turned and ran like a deer as if afraid he might regret his generosity.

The dusty road wound its way among the fields like a yellow ribbon on a green cloth, offering no shelter from the burning rays of the sun, and stretching out in a dreary length.

The hunchback plodded steadily on with his heavy burden, and as he walked the good people in the neighboring city of Portland were reading in their morning papers the following item:—

A SINGULAR EXPLOSION.

The ship “Atlanta” anchored inside the breakwater just before midnight, and her master reports a remarkable accident.

The “Atlanta” loaded at Savannah last week with cotton and turpentine, bound for Bremen. Owing to baffling winds she was eighty miles off Wood Island yesterday afternoon when an explosion occurred which blew off the

main hatch, and was followed by dense volumes of what appeared to be smoke.

Believing the ship to be on fire, Capt. Littlefield's first thought was of his wife and child, who were on board. The lifeboat was lowered, and in her were placed the captain's son and the cabin boy, a hunchback.

Before Mrs. Littlefield could be gotten over the side, the sailors reported no fire in the hold, and the vapor supposed to be smoke was probably the gases arising from the turpentine stored in porous barrels of red oak.

In the excitement no particular attention was paid to the children for some time, since the boat was believed to be firmly secured, and the consternation of the captain can be imagined when it was discovered that the craft had gone adrift.

The ship stood off and on several hours without discovering any signs of the missing ones, and was then headed for this harbor.

As a matter of course the captain will be obliged to proceed on his voyage without delay; but Mrs. Littlefield is to remain in town several days hoping to receive some news of her child, and it is believed that the revenue cutter "Cushing" will cruise along the shore until the boat is found.

It is understood that a liberal reward will be offered for any information which may be given regarding the whereabouts of the children, and until that has been done the editors of this paper will thankfully receive tidings of the missing ones in case they have been seen or sighted.

It is particularly desirable that masters of vessels should keep a sharp lookout for a drifting boat.

CHAPTER II.

AT AUNT NANCY'S.

JACK toiled manfully on, running until his breath came in such short gasps that he was forced to walk slowly, and then pressing forward once more as if expecting Farmer Pratt was in full pursuit, urged to rapid travelling by the fear that little Louis would be taken to the poor farm.

Up the long, steep hill, past the railroad station, until three roads stretched out before him: one straight ahead, another to the right, and the third to the left.

He believed there was no time for hesitation.

The one leading toward the south was the most inviting because of the trees scattered here and there along its edges, and into this he turned, going directly away from the city where Louis's mother awaited tidings of her darling.

The child grew fretful because of the heat and the dust, and the little hunchback heeded not his own fatigue in the effort to quiet him.

On he went, literally staggering under his heavy

burden, until the yellow road seemed to mellow into a mist which danced and fell, and rose and danced again before his eyes until further progress was wellnigh impossible.

They had arrived at a tiny stream, the banks of which were fringed with alders, and overhead a wooden bridge afforded a most pleasing shelter from the sun's burning rays.

Wiping the perspiration from his face, Jack looked back.

No one was in sight.

If Farmer Pratt had come in pursuit he might have mistaken the road, or turned homeward again some time previous, believing the boat not of sufficient value to warrant the journey which, if successful, would only end at the poorhouse.

"Here's where we're goin' to stop, Louis," Jack said, lowering the child to the ground. "It'll be cool among these bushes, and if we turn into the fields a bit no one can see us from the road."

Then Jack took off his shoes and stockings, holding them on one arm as he raised the child with the other, and, wading through the shallow water, made his way among the bushes a distance of forty or fifty feet to where the leafy screen would prevent passing travellers from seeing them.

"I tell you what, the water feels good around a fellow's feet. I'm goin' to give you the same kind of a dose, an' then you'll be ready to go to sleep."

Louis, sitting on the grass at the edge of the stream, offered no objection to the plan, and Jack soon made him ready for the partial bath.

As the child's feet touched the water he laughed with glee, and Jack's fatigue was forgotten in his delight at having been able to afford this pleasure.

After a few moments of such sport the misshapen guardian wiped the pink feet carefully with his handkerchief, replaced the shoes and stockings, took from his pocket the bread which was crumbled into many fragments, moistened them in the brook, and fed his charge until the latter's eyes closed in slumber.

Not before he had arranged a screen of leaves in such a manner that the sun would be prevented from looking in upon the sleeping child did Jack think of himself, and then he too indulged in the much-needed rest.

The hours passed until the sun began to sink in the west.

The birds came out from among the leaves and peeped down curiously at the sleeping children, while a colony of frogs leaped upon a moss-

covered log, croaking in chorus their surprise at these unfamiliar visitors.

One venerable fellow seemed to think this a most fitting opportunity to read his sons a homily on the sin of running away, and after the lengthy lesson was concluded he plunged into the water with a hoarse note of disapprobation, making such a splash that Jack leaped to his feet thoroughly awake and decidedly frightened.

The hasty departure of the other frogs explained the cause of the disturbance, and he laughed to himself as he said,—

“I reckon my hump frightened them as much as they did me.”

He made a hurried toilet, bathed Louis’s face with his wet handkerchief until the little fellow awoke, and then continued what was at the same time a flight and a journey.

“We’ve got to run the risk that somebody else will try to send us to the poor farm,” he said when they had trudged along the dusty road until the child became fretful again. “At the next nice-lookin’ house we come to I’m goin’ to ask the folks if they’ll let me do chores enough to pay for our lodgin’.”

Fully half an hour passed before they were where this plan could be carried into effect, and

then Jack halted in front of a small white cottage which stood at the head of an arm of the sea, partially hidden by the trees.

“Here’s where we’ve got to try our luck,” the boy said as he surveyed the house intently, and almost as he spoke a tiny woman with tiny ringlets either side her wrinkled face appeared in the doorway, starting back as if in alarm on seeing the newcomers.

“Goodness me!” she exclaimed as she suddenly observed Jack staring intently at her. “Why don’t you come out of the sun? That child will be burned brown as an Injun if you stand there long.”

Jack pressed Louis closer to him as he stepped forward a few paces, and asked hesitatingly,—

“Please, ma’am, if you’ll let us stay here tonight I’ll do up all the chores as slick as a pin.”

The little woman’s surprise deepened almost into bewilderment as she glanced first at Louis, who had by this time clambered down from his guardian’s arms, and then at Jack’s boots, which were covered thickly with dust.

“Oh, I’ll brush myself before I come in,” the boy said quickly, believing her hesitation was caused by the dirt on his garments, “an’ we won’t be a mite of trouble.”

The mistress of the cottage took Louis by the hand and led him, with Jack following close behind, into the wide, cool hall, the floor of which was covered with rugs woven with representations of impossible animals in all the colors of the rainbow.

"Now tell me where you came from, and why it is necessary to ask for a home?"

Jack hesitated an instant.

The fear that she too might insist on sending Louis to the poor farm caused him to question whether he had better tell the whole truth, but another look at the kindly face decided him.

He related his story with more detail than he had to Farmer Pratt, and when he concluded the little woman said in a motherly tone,—

"You poor children! If the ship exploded there's no one for you to go home to, and what *will* become of such a helpless pair?"

"I can't tell I'm sure, ma'am; but I know we ain't helpless"; and Jack spoke very decidedly now. "I'm big an' can work, so I'll take care of Louis till we find his father."

"But if the ship was blown all to pieces?" the little woman continued.

"That don't make any difference," Jack interrupted. "We're goin' right to his house in New York some time, no matter how far it is."

"But it's a terribly long distance, and you children will surely be sun-struck before you get even to Boston!" Then she added quickly, "Here I am forgetting that you must be hungry! Come straight away into the kitchen while I see what there is in the cupboard, for Aunt Nancy Curtis never lets any one, much less children, want for food very long in her house."

"Are you Aunt Nancy?" Jack asked.

"I'm aunt to everybody in the neighborhood, which ain't many, and two or three more nephews won't make any difference. Set right up to the table, and after you've had a glass of cool milk, a piece of chicken and some cake I baked to put away for the summer boarders, we'll see what can be done."

Jack was disposed to be just a trifle jealous of Louis's evident admiration for this quaint little Aunt Nancy. He had already taken her by the hand, and, in his baby fashion, was telling some story which no one, probably not even himself, could understand.

"You are a dear little boy," the old lady said as she led him into the kitchen; "but neither you nor Jack here is any more calculated to walk to New York than I am to go to China this minute."

"If you'll let me have a brush I'll get some of this dust off," Jack said as he glanced at the well-scoured floor and then at his shoes. "I'm not fit to go anywhere till I look more decent."

"Here's a whisk-broom. Be careful not to break the handle, and don't throw it on the ground when you're done," Aunt Nancy said as she handed the brush to Jack. "There's the pump, and here's a towel and piece of soap, so scrub yourself as much as you please, for boys never can be too clean. I'll comb the baby's hair while you're gone, and then we'll have supper."

Louis made not the slightest protest when his misshapen little guardian left him alone with Aunt Nancy. He had evidently decided that she was a woman who could be trusted, and had travelled so much during the day that even a journey to the pump was more than he cared to undertake.

Jack brushed and scrubbed, and rubbed his face with the towel, after holding his head under the pump, until the skin glowed red, but cleanly.

When he entered the kitchen again where the little woman and Louis were seated cosily at the table, he was presentable even to Aunt Nancy, in whose eyes the least particle of dirt was an abomination.

He took the vacant chair by Louis's side, and was considerably surprised, because it was something so unusual in his experience, to see the little woman clasp her withered hands and invoke a blessing upon "the strangers within her gates," when she had thanked her Father for all his bounties.

"I went to meetin' once down in Savannah," Jack said; "but I didn't know folks had 'em right in their houses."

Aunt Nancy looked at him with astonishment, and replied gravely,—

"My child, it is never possible to give too much praise for all we are permitted to enjoy, and one needn't wait until he is in church before speaking to our Father."

Jack did not exactly understand what she meant, but he knew from the expression on the wrinkled face that it was perfectly correct, and at once proceeded to give his undivided attention to the food which had been put upon his plate with a liberal hand.

How thoroughly enjoyable was that meal in the roomy old kitchen, through which the summer breezes wafted perfume from the honeysuckles, and the bees sang at the open windows while intent on the honey harvest!

When the children's hunger was appeased, it seemed as if half their troubles had suddenly vanished.

Louis crowed and talked after his own peculiar fashion; Jack told stories of life on board the "Atlanta," and Aunt Nancy appeared to enjoy this "visiting" quite as much as did her guests.

The housework was to be done, however, and could not be neglected, deeply interested though the little woman was in the yarns Jack spun, therefore she said as she began to collect the soiled dishes,—

"Now if you will take care of the baby I'll have the kitchen cleaned in a twinkling, and then we'll go out under the big oak-tree where I love to sit when the sun is painting the clouds in the west with red and gold."

"Louis can take care of himself if we put him on the floor," Jack replied, "and I will dry the dishes for you; I've done it lots of times on the 'Atlanta.'"

The little woman could not refuse this proffered aid, although she looked very much as if she fancied the work would not be done exactly to her satisfaction, and after glancing at Jack's hands to make certain they were perfectly clean, she began operations.

Much to her surprise, the deformed boy was very apt at such tasks, and Aunt Nancy said as she looked over her spectacles at him while he carefully dried one of her best China cups,—

“Well I declare! If you ain’t the first boy I ever saw who was fit to live with an old maid like me. You are handier than half the girls I have here when the summer boarders come, and if you could only milk a cow we should get along famously.”

“It wouldn’t take me long to learn,” Jack said quickly; for he was eager to assist the little lady as much as possible, having decided in his own mind that this would be a very pleasant abiding place for himself and Louis until the weather should be cooler, when the tramp to New York could be continued with less discomfort. “If you’d show me how once I’m sure I’d soon find out, and—”

“It won’t do any harm to try at all events,” Aunt Nancy replied thoughtfully; “but the cow hasn’t come home yet, and there’s plenty of time.”

When the dishes were washed and set carefully away in the cupboard, the little woman explaining to her assistant where each particular article of crockery belonged, Jack began to sweep the already painfully clean floor. Aunt Nancy wiped

with a damp towel imaginary specks of dirt from the furniture, and Louis, as if realizing the importance of winning the affections of his hostess, laid his head on the rag rug and closed his eyes in slumber before the work of putting the kitchen to rights was finished.

“Dear little baby! I suppose he’s all tired out,” Aunt Nancy said as she took him in her arms, leaving to Jack the important duty of folding one of her best damask tablecloths, a task which, under other circumstances, she would not have trusted to her most intimate friend. “I’m not very handy with children, but it seems as if I ought to be able to undress this one.”

“Of course you can. All there is to do is unbutton the things an’ pull them off.”

Aunt Nancy was by no means as awkward at such work as she would have her guest believe.

In a few moments she had undressed Louis without awakening him, and clothed him for the night in one of her bedgowns, which, as a matter of course, was much too long, but so strongly scented with lavender that Jack felt positive the child could not fail to sleep sweetly and soundly.

Then laying him in the centre of a rest-inviting bed which was covered with the most intricate of patchwork quilts, in a room on the ground-floor

that overlooked the lane and the big oak-tree, they left him with a smile on his lips, as if the angels had already begun to weave dream-pictures for him.

Aunt Nancy led the way out through the "fore-room," and, that Jack might see the beauties it contained, she opened one of the shutters, allowing the rays of the setting sun to fall upon the pictures of two of the dead and gone Curtis family, an impossible naval engagement colored in the most gorgeous style, two vases filled with alum-encrusted grasses, and a huge crockery rooster with unbending feathers of evey hue.

This last-named ornament particularly attracted Jack's attention, and during fully five minutes he stood gazing at it in silent admiration, but without daring to ask if he could take the brilliantly painted bird in his hands.

"Handsome, isn't it?" Aunt Nancy asked, turning her head slowly from side to side while she critically viewed the combination of colors much as if she had never seen them before.

"Its perfectly splendid!"

"I'm glad you like it. I think a great deal of him; too much to allow a live rooster on the place crowing around when he can't. It was presented to me in my girlhood days by a young

gentleman whom every one thought was destined to be an ornament in the world ; but—”

Aunt Nancy paused. Her thoughts had gone trooping down the dusty avenues of the past, and after waiting fully a moment Jack asked,—

“ Where is the young gentleman now ? ”

“ I don’t know,” was the reply sandwiched between two sobs, and then Aunt Nancy became her old self once more.

She closed the shutters carefully, waved her apron in the air to frighten away any over-bold dust specks, and the two went out on the long, velvety lane that the little woman might admire the glories of the setting sun.

CHAPTER III.

LEARNING TO MILK.

A low bench painted green and fastened against the trunk of the old oak, that there might be no possibility of its being overturned, was the place where Aunt Nancy told Jack she spent the pleasant summer evenings.

"Except where there are caterpillars around," she added, "and then I carry the rocking-chair to the stone doorstep. If you could kill caterpillars, Jack, you would be doing the greatest possible favor, for they certainly make my life wretched at times, although I don't know why a person should be afraid of anything God has made."

"Oh, I can kill 'em," Jack replied confidently. "Bring on your caterpillars when you want 'em killed, an' I'll fix the job. There ain't any trouble about that."

"But I don't want to bring them on," Aunt Nancy said, hesitatingly. "I never like to touch the little crawling things, and you will have to do that part of the work."

"I'll see to it," Jack replied, and believing she would be free in the future from the pests which interfered with her twilight pleasures, Aunt Nancy's face took on an expression of complete satisfaction.

"Now let's talk about yourself and the baby," she said. "You must not attempt to walk to New York while this hot weather lasts, and it would cost a power of money to go there on the cars."

"I know it," Jack replied with a sigh, "but so long as there isn't a cent between us, I guess we'll have to foot it."

"I've been thinking why you shouldn't stay here a spell. You make yourself so handy about the house that I sha'n't mind the extra trouble with the baby, and there are times while the summer boarders are here when I do need a boy very badly."

"That's just what I'd like," and Jack spoke emphatically. "If you'll let us stay two or three weeks I'll pay my way in work, an' see that Louis don't bother you."

"I believe that will be the best way out of it. The summer boarders are to come in two or three weeks. Before then I'll write to my brother Abner, in Binghamton, who'll be sure

to know about Capt. Littlefield, and perhaps he can make some arrangement for your passage."

"Where's Binghamton?" Jack asked in perplexity.

"Why, it's in York State. I ain't certain how near to the big city, but of course it can't be very far away. Abner's a master hand at readin', so if he don't happen to know Capt. Littlefield as a friend, he'd be sure to have heard of him. When he was home here he was acquainted with everybody for fifty miles around. He could tell you who each man married, how many children they had, and kept the run of everything that happened in the neighborhood. I used to say Abner minded other people's business better than his own, and that *was* his fault," she added with a sigh. "But we all of us have our faults, and it's never right to speak about those of another before we have fairly weighed our own. He's the one, though, to find the baby's father, so you needn't have any further trouble regarding it; but wait till we get a letter from him."

Jack was not as confident as Aunt Nancy appeared to be that this "brother Abner" would know all the people in New York; but he was more than content to remain where he was for

a certain length of time in the hope of being able to reach the city in some less laborious way than by walking.

Then Aunt Nancy told him about herself, and of the farm which had belonged to her father, but descended to her at his death, because Abner was unwilling to spend his time on land so unproductive that the severest labor failed to bring forth a remunerative crop.

"It isn't very good, I'll admit," she said reflectively; "but by taking a few summer boarders I've been able to make both ends meet, and that's all an old maid like me ought to expect."

"Have you always lived alone?"

"It's nigh on to twelve years since father died, and, excepting in the summer, I've had neither child nor chick here. An old woman ain't pleasant company at the best, and if Abner's daughters don't like to visit their aunt, I can't say I blame them."

"Well I do!" Jack said decidedly. "I think you're the nicest old lady I ever saw, and I'd be willin' to stay here all the time if I could."

Aunt Nancy was not accustomed to flattery; but it must be admitted, from the expression on her wrinkled face, that it was far from unpleasant, and by way of reward she patted Jack on the head almost affectionately.

"Perhaps you won't think so after a while," she said with a smile; and then as Jack was about to make protestations, she added, "it's time to go after the cow, and then I'll give you the first lesson in milking."

The farm was not so large that it required many moments to reach the pasture, for the old lady had only to walk to the rear of the barn where the crumple-horned cow was standing at the end of a narrow lane awaiting her coming.

As the animal stepped carefully over the bars after they had been let down, Jack could not help thinking she was just such a cow as one would fancy should belong to Aunt Nancy.

She walked in a dainty manner, acting almost as if trying not to bring any unnecessary amount of dirt into the barnyard, and behaving in every way as one would say her mistress might under similar circumstances.

"While I go for the milking pail you pull some clover from under the trees, for she always expects a lunch while being milked," Aunt Nancy said; and in a few moments Jack had gathered such a feast as caused the sedate animal to toss her head in disapprobation at the unusually large amount she was expected to devour after having been cropping pasture grass all day.

With a pail which had been scoured until it shone like silver, and a tiny three-legged stool, white as the floor of her kitchen, the little woman returned.

Then with many a “Co, Bossy! So, Bossy!” as if the quiet-looking animal was expected to give way to the most violent demonstrations of wrath, Aunt Nancy placed the stool in the most advantageous position, and said, as she seated herself,—

“Now watch me a few minutes, and you’ll see how easy it is after getting the knack.”

Jack gazed intently at every movement, his eyes opened wide with astonishment as the streams of milk poured into the pail with a peculiar “swish,” and before the creamy foam had fully covered the bottom he was quite positive it would be no difficult matter for him to perform the same operation.

“I can do it now, if you’ll get up.”

Aunt Nancy vacated the stool without hesitation, for milking seemed such a simple matter that there was no question in her mind but that it could be learned in one very short lesson, and Jack sat down.

The cow looked around at this change of attendants, but was too well-bred to express any

great amount of surprise, and the hunchback took hold of what appeared like so many fat fingers.

Fancying that strength alone was necessary, he pulled most vigorously.

Not a drop of milk came ; but he accomplished something, for the animal tossed her head impatiently.

Jack pulled harder the second time, and then, as Aunt Nancy screamed loudly, the cow started at full speed for the other side of the yard, facing about there at the boy whom she believed was tormenting her wilfully, while she shook her head in a menacing manner.

Fortunately the milk-pail was not overturned ; but in preventing such a catastrophe, Jack rolled from the stool to the ground with no gentle force, terrified quite as much by Aunt Nancy's screams as by the sudden movement of old crumple-horn.

“ Why, what’s the matter ? ” he asked, as he scrambled to his feet, looking first at his hostess, and then at the frightened animal.

“ I ought to have known a boy couldn’t milk,” Aunt Nancy said impatiently and almost angrily. “ It seems as if they have a faculty of hurting dumb beasts.”

“ But I didn’t mean to,” Jack said apologeti-

cally. "I worked just as you did, and pulled a good deal harder, but yet the milk wouldn't come."

Aunt Nancy made no reply.

Taking up the pail and stool she walked across the yard, trying to soothe the cow in the peculiar language she had used when beginning the task; and Jack, understanding that he had hurt the feelings of both his hostess and her pet, followed contritely, as he said coaxingly, —

"Please let me try it once more. I am certain I can do it if you'll give me another chance."

It was not until Aunt Nancy had led the cow back to the pile of clover, and there stroked her head and ears until she was ready to resume the rudely interrupted feast, that any attention was paid to Jack's entreaties.

"I'll show you once more," she finally said, "and you must watch to see exactly how I move my fingers. It isn't the pulling that brings the milk, but the pressure of the hand."

This time Jack paid strict attention, and in a few moments began to fancy he had discovered what Aunt Nancy called the "knack."

But she would not relinquish her seat.

"Take hold with one hand while I stay here, and be careful not to hurt the poor creature."

Very tenderly Jack made the second attempt, and was so successful as to extract at least a dozen drops from the well-filled udder.

This was sufficient, however, to show him what should be done, even though he was at first unable to perform the task, and, thanks to Aunt Nancy's patience, and the gentleness of the animal, before the milking was brought to a close, he had so far mastered the lesson as to win from his teacher a limited amount of praise.

"I don't know as I should expect you to learn at once," she said; "but you are getting along so well that by to-morrow night I wouldn't be surprised if you could do it alone. Now I'll go and strain the milk, and you may split me a little kindling wood if you will. Somehow I have never been able to use an axe without danger of cutting my feet, and it's almost like tempting Providence to take one in my hands."

Jack did as he was bidden, and although the axe was decidedly rusty and very blunt, to say nothing of its being shaky in the helve, before she finished taking care of the milk he had such a pile of kindlings as would have cost her a week's labor to prepare.

"Well!" the little woman said as she came from the cool cellar and surveyed the fruits of his

industry, "if you can't do anything else on a farm but that, it'll be a wonderful relief to me. An axe is such a dangerous instrument that I always tremble when I touch one."

Jack looked at the ancient tool (which could hardly have inflicted any injury unless one chanced to drop it on his toes) with a smile, but said nothing, and after Aunt Nancy had shown him how to fasten the wood-shed door with a huge latch that any burglar over four feet tall could have raised, she led the way into the house.

The milking pail was to be washed, a solitary moth which had found its way into the kitchen was to be killed lest he should do some damage to the rag carpet, and Aunt Nancy lighted a candle with a solemn air.

"This is the last work of the day," she said, "and perhaps I attach too much importance to it, but I never allow myself to go to bed without making sure there's no one hidden in the house. We'll examine the upper part first, and after that has been done I will show you a chamber which you can have until the summer boarders come. Then we must make different arrangements, for the house is so small that I'm terribly put to it for room."

Jack followed the little woman up the back stairs, and each of the four apartments was subjected to the most rigid scrutiny, the boy holding the candle while Aunt Nancy not only peered under the beds and behind the bureaus, but even opened the tiniest closets in search of a supposed intruder.

"We are safe for another day," she said with a long-drawn sigh of relief, "and after looking through the fore-room once more I'll lock the doors."

There was such an air of responsibility about the little woman that Jack, not fully understanding what she expected to find, immediately conceived the idea that peaceful though this portion of the country appeared, it must be a very dangerous neighborhood, for his hostess could not have taken more precautions had it been known positively that a band of Indians were lurking in the vicinity.

Nothing more alarming than the moth was found, however, and after the window fastenings had been carefully examined, Aunt Nancy led the way back to the kitchen, where she once more surprised her guest by taking down the well-worn Bible.

In a thin, quavering voice she read therefrom a

certain number of verses in which she seemed to find the greatest satisfaction, and then replaced the book reverentially on the stand appropriated to its keeping.

Then, to Jack's further surprise, she knelt by the side of the chair and began a simple but heartfelt prayer, while the boy nestled around uneasily, not certain whether it was proper for him to stand up, or follow her example, therefore he remained where he was.

When the evening devotions had been brought to a close, he felt decidedly uncomfortable in mind, but did not think it advisable to expose his ignorance by asking the little woman what he should have done.

"Now we'll go to bed," Aunt Nancy said as she arose to her feet with such a look of faith on her wrinkled face as reminded the boy of pictures he had seen.

Without a word he followed her upstairs to a small room directly over the kitchen, which, however contracted it might seem to others, was twice as large as he needed when compared with his quarters on board the "Atlanta."

Then, as if her aim was to astonish and bewilder him on this first evening, Aunt Nancy kissed him on both cheeks as she said "Good night," and left him to his own reflections.

CHAPTER IV.

PURSUED.

IT was a long while before slumber visited Jack's eyelids on this first night spent at the farm.

To have found such a pleasant resting place after his experience at Farmer Pratt's, and when the best he had expected was to be allowed to remain until morning, was almost bewildering; at the same time the friendly manner in which the kindly faced old lady treated him made a deep impression on his heart.

During fully an hour he speculated as to how it would be possible for him to reach New York with Louis, and, not being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, he decided that that matter at least could safely be left in Aunt Nancy's care.

Then, all anxiety as to the immediate future having been dissipated, he thought of various ways by which he could lighten the little woman's labors.

He laid plans for making himself so useful about the farm that she would be repaid for her care of

Louis, and these ideas were in his mind when he crossed the border of dreamland, where, until nearly daybreak, he tried to milk diminutive cows, or struggled to carry enormous tin pails.

Despite his disagreeable dreams, the sleep was refreshing, and when the first glow of dawn appeared in the eastern sky he was aroused by the sound of Aunt Nancy's voice from the foot of the stairs.

Jack's first waking thought was a continuation of the last on the night previous, and, dressing hurriedly, he ran down to the kitchen to begin the labor which he intended should make him a desirable member of the family.

To his great disappointment the fire had been built, Louis dressed, and the morning's work well advanced when he entered the room.

"Why didn't you call me before?" he asked reproachfully. "I meant to have done all this while you were asleep; but I laid awake so long last night that it didn't seem possible for my eyes to open."

"I am accustomed to doing these things for myself," Aunt Nancy replied with a kindly smile, "and don't mind it one bit, especially when the kindlings have been prepared. I got up a little earlier than usual because I was afraid there might

be some trouble about dressing the baby ; but he's just as good a child as can be, and seems right well contented here."

"It would be funny if he wasn't," Jack replied as he took Louis in his arms for the morning greeting.

There was a shade of sorrow in his heart because the child evinced no desire to remain with him, but scrambled out of his arms at the first opportunity to toddle toward Aunt Nancy, who ceased her work of brushing imaginary dirt from the floor in order to kiss the little fellow as tenderly as a mother could have done.

"It seems as if he'd got all through with me," Jack said sorrowfully. "I believe he likes you the best now."

"Don't be jealous, my boy. It's only natural the child should cling to a woman when he can ; but that doesn't signify he has lost any affection for you. It is time old crumple-horn was milked, and we'll take Louis with us so he won't get into mischief. I'm going to give you another lesson this morning."

Jack made a vain effort to repress the sigh which would persist in coming to his lips as the baby crowed with delight when the little woman lifted him in her arms, and taking the milking

pail, he led the way out through the dewy grass to the barnyard, where the cow stood looking over the rails as if wondering why Aunt Nancy was so late.

Jack insisted that he could milk without any further instructions, and, after gathering an armful of the sweet-scented clover, he set boldly to work while Aunt Nancy and Louis watched him from the other side of the fence.

This time his efforts were crowned with success, and although he did not finish the task as quickly as the little woman could have done it, by the aid of a few hints from her he had drawn the last drop of milk into the pail before the cow began to show signs of impatience.

Then Aunt Nancy and Louis returned to the house while Jack drove the meek-eyed animal to the pasture, and when this was done he searched the shed for a rake.

He succeeded in finding one with not more than half the teeth missing, and began to scrape up the sticks and dried leaves from the lane, a work which was well calculated to yet further win the confidence of the neat little mistress of the farm.

When the morning meal was served, Jack had so far become accustomed to Aunt Nancy's ways that he bowed his head without being prompted, while she asked a blessing.

After breakfast was concluded the hunchback proceeded to put into execution the plan formed on the night previous.

"If you'll tell me what to do I'll go to work as soon as the lane is cleaned, an' that won't take a long while. I s'pose there's plenty to be done."

"Yes," Aunt Nancy replied with a sigh, "there's a great deal of work which a woman can't do; but I don't know as a boy like you would be able to get along any better than I."

"There won't be any harm in tryin'," Jack said manfully. "Tell me what it is you want."

"Well, the pasture fence is broken in several places, and I was thinking of getting Daniel Chick to come an' fix it; but perhaps you might patch the breaks up so's a cow couldn't get out."

"Of course I can. It ain't much of a job if you've got nails an' a hammer. I'll tackle it as soon as the lane is finished."

Aunt Nancy explained that the fence to which she referred bordered the road a short distance above the house, and Jack was so impatient to begin the labor that, contrary to his usual custom, he took a hurried leave of Louis.

An hour was sufficient in which to finish the self-imposed task on the lane, and then, with a

very shaky hammer and a handful of rusty nails, he set out to repair the fence, leaving Louis playing in the kitchen with the gorgeous crockery rooster, while Aunt Nancy was busily engaged setting the house to rights generally.

The scene of Jack's first attempt at fence building was fully an eighth of a mile away, and in a clump of alder-bushes which shut off all view of the house.

It was by no means a simple task which he found before him.

The posts had so far decayed that an expert workman would have considered it necessary to replace them with new timbers; but since this was beyond his skill, he set about mending it after his own fashion.

It must not be supposed that Jack loved to work better than does any other boy; but he believed it was necessary for him to remain with Aunt Nancy until such time as he could find an opportunity of continuing the journey in some more rapid manner than by walking, and the desire to make himself useful about the farm was so great that labor ceased to be a hardship.

He had been engaged in this rather difficult task fully an hour, paying little or no attention to anything save the work in hand, when the

rattle of wheels on the hard road attracted his notice.

Up to this time no person had passed in either direction, and it was from curiosity rather than any idea the approaching travellers might be connected with his fortunes, that he peered out from among the alder-bushes.

Immediately he drew back in alarm.

He had seen, coming directly toward him in a lumbering old wagon and hardly more than a hundred yards away, Farmer Pratt and his son Tom.

“They’re huntin’ for me!” he said to himself as he crept farther among the bushes to conceal himself from view, and a secure hiding place had hardly been gained when the travellers came to a full stop at the little brook which ran on the opposite side of the road, in order to give their horse some water.

As a matter of fact Farmer Pratt *was* in search of the two who had left his house so unceremoniously; but now he had no intention of taking them to the poorhouse.

Quite by accident a copy of a newspaper containing an account of the explosion on board the “Atlanta,” and the information that Mrs. Littlefield would remain in Portland in the hope of gaining

some information regarding her child, had come into his hands, and it did not require much study on his part to understand that in the greed to possess himself of the boat by ridding himself of the children, he had lost the opportunity of earning a valuable reward.

There was a stormy time in the Pratt household when this fact became known, and even Master Tom came in for more than his full share of the scolding because the children had been allowed to go away.

"It would have been as good as a hundred dollars in my pocket if I could have lugged them youngsters into town," the farmer repeated over and over again as he blamed first his wife and then his son for what was really his own fault. "I thought a boat worth twenty dollars would be a mighty big haul for one mornin', but here was a show of gettin' five times as much jest by holdin' them two over night, an' you had to let 'em slip through your fingers."

Farmer Pratt dwelt upon this unpleasant fact until he finally convinced himself that he would have acted the part of a good Samaritan had the opportunity not been denied him, and very early on this same morning he started out for the purpose of earning the reward by finding the castaways.

Jack, crouching among the bushes where he could distinguish the movements of those whom he considered his enemies, heard the farmer say, while the half-fed horse was quenching his thirst,—

“I reckon we’ve got a day’s work before us, all on account of you an’ your mother, for that hunchback couldn’t have walked as far with the baby. Most likely he found some one who gave him a lift on the road. The chances are he’s in Biddeford by this time, other folks have heard the whole story.”

Tom made no reply, probably because he feared to say anything which might again call forth a flood of reproach, and his father added,—

“I reckon our best way will be to push right on to town instead of huntin’ along the road as we’ve been doin’. Time is gettin’ mighty short if we want to catch him before people know what has happened.”

The farmer was so impatient to arrive at the city that the horse was urged on before his thirst was fully quenched, and as the noise of the wheels told that the briefly interrupted journey had been resumed, Jack crept cautiously out from among the bushes to where he could watch the movements of the travellers until they should have passed Aunt Nancy’s farm.

As may be supposed, he was thoroughly alarmed.

That which he heard convinced him beyond a doubt the farmer was searching for him, and there was no question in his mind but that it was for the sole and only purpose of carrying him and Louis to the poor farm.

"I s'pose Aunt Nancy would up an' tell the whole story if they should ask her," he muttered, "an' then I'd have to come out an' go along with 'em, 'cause I wouldn't let that man carry Louis off alone."

The color came back to his cheeks, however, and the throbbing of his heart was lessened as he saw the wagon wheel past the lane without either of its occupants making any move toward calling at the house.

Most likely neither Aunt Nancy nor Louis were in the yard, and Farmer Pratt was so eager to reach the town where he believed the children to be, that, as he had intimated, there was no further stop to be made along the road.

But Jack's mind was far from being relieved even after the clumsy vehicle had passed out of sight, for he knew the farmer would return, failing to gain any information of those he was so anxious to find, and he might think it worth his while to call at Aunt Nancy's.

Jack had now lost all interest in his work, and seated himself near the fence trying to decide whether he would be warranted in leaving the temporary home he had found, to take refuge in flight.

This he might have done on the impulse of the moment but for the restraining thought that it would be in the highest degree dangerous to travel in either direction on the road, and to make his way through the fields and woods was a matter of impossibility, since he had no idea of the proper course to be pursued.

"I don't s'pose Aunt Nancy'd lie even to save us from goin' to the poor farm," he said aloud to himself; "but if she would, I'd hide out in the bushes with Louis till I was sure that man had got through huntin' after us, 'cause he can't keep this thing up all summer."

This was by far the best plan Jack could devise for the baby's safety, and yet it seemed hardly possible it would be carried into execution because of the probable unwillingness of Aunt Nancy to so much as equivocate.

After thinking the matter over fully twenty minutes without arriving at any other conclusion which promised the slightest hope of escape from his pursuers, he decided to boldly ask the little

woman if she would promise, in case Mr. Pratt should call upon her, to say that she had seen neither of her guests.

“She can’t any more’n get mad at it, an’ if she won’t agree then I’ll take the risk of startin’ off once more, but it’s goin’ to be pretty tough on both of us.”

There was yet considerable work to be done in the way of fence building; but now Jack had no idea of continuing the labor.

He was so agitated that the shaky hammer lay unheeded on the ground where it had fallen when he first saw the travellers, and the nails were left to gather a yet thicker coat of rust as he made his way up through the line of bushes to approach the house from the rear, not daring to go boldly around by the road.

CHAPTER V.

AN ENCOUNTER.

BELIEVING his only enemies were those whom he had seen driving up the road, Jack paid no attention to anything in front of him, save when it was absolutely necessary in order to guide his footsteps, but kept his eyes fixed upon the dusty highway.

Owing to the straggling line of bushes, he was forced to make a wide detour to reach the barn unseen by any travellers, and he had not traversed more than half the required distance when a loud cry from a clump of alders which bordered the duck pond caused him to come to a full stop.

“Hello, Hunchie! What are you doin’ here?”

Jack looked up quickly in alarm, fancying the voice sounded like Tom Pratt’s, and for an instant believed his pursuers had apparently continued their journey only for the purpose of taking him by surprise in the rear.

There was no person in sight, however, and during a few seconds he stood motionless, trying

to decide whether it would be safest to run directly toward the farmhouse, or attempt to make his escape through the fields.

Then the question was repeated, and before Jack could have fled, had he been so disposed, three boys came out from among the alders, approaching very near as if to prevent flight on the part of the hunchback.

"Who are you?" one of the strangers asked, "an' where did you come from?"

"I'm Jack Dudley."

"Where do you live?"

"I'm stayin' over to Aunt Nancy Curtis's awhile," Jack replied hesitatingly, doubtful if it would be well to give these not over-friendly looking boys all the information they desired.

"What are you doin' there?" another of the party asked.

"Helpin' 'round at whatever she wants done till the summer boarders go away."

"Oh! So you're the hired man, are you?" the first boy said in a sneering tone.

"I ain't so very much of a man; but I reckon I can do her work, an' I mustn't fool 'round here, for I'm pretty busy this mornin'."

"You'll stay till we find out what right you've got to run across this field," the boy who

had first spoken said decidedly. "We've always done Aunt Nancy's chores, an' you're makin'a big mistake by takin' our job away."

Jack looked once more toward the road to make certain Farmer Pratt and his son were not returning.

Then he glanced in the direction of the house, hoping Aunt Nancy might be in sight, for he understood from the tone and attitude of the strangers that they were bent on mischief.

Not a person could be seen, and he had no other alternative save to remain where he was until such time as the boys should be willing to let him pass.

Any attempt at flight could have been easily checked, since, owing to his deformity, he was not able to run as fast as others of his age.

Probably he felt just a trifle frightened; but he stood his ground boldly, determined not to let the strangers see a show of weakness, as he said,—

"I didn't come here to take any feller's job. Aunt Nancy gave me a chance to stay this summer, an' I jumped at it, 'cause there's no boy needs a home more'n I do jest now."

"Well, see here, Hunchie," the elder of the party replied in a threatening tone, "we don't know how much you need a home, nor we don't

care ; but there's one thing certain, you ain't goin' to stay 'round here this summer. Us fellers can do all Aunt Nancy's chores an' a good deal more. The job belongs to us. If you say you'll leave before night, it'll be all right, an' if not, we'll thump the life out of you."

"Perhaps that can't be done," Jack said calmly, with an assumption of courage which was far from natural.

"Last summer there was a feller come snooopin' 'round to help on the summer-boarder business, but he soon found it wasn't safe to steal jobs from them as lives here the whole year. We jest about killed him."

"Why didn't you stuff his skin an' set it up on the road here, so's other fellers would know enough not to stop?" Jack asked in a sarcastic tone as he stepped back a few paces toward a thicker clump of bushes, where it would be impossible for the strangers to make an attack from the rear. "You can't be any tougher than you look, an' I guess I'll be able to keep on livin' till summer's over, even if I do stay."

"Does that mean you ain't goin' to leave?" And the boy advanced threateningly with clinched fists until he stood within a few inches of the deformed lad, who now understood that a fight was inevitable.

"It's pretty nigh the size of it," Jack replied; and despite all efforts, his voice trembled slightly, for he knew full well it would be impossible to hold his own against three bullies. "But before beginnin' the row I want you to understand one thing: if I don't work for somebody, I've got to live out of doors, for I haven't a cent. I ain't sayin' but the three of you can lick me, of course, but you'll have to do it every day in the week before I'll leave this farm."

Perhaps the bully was a trifle ashamed for threatening one so much smaller than himself, and deformed, for, instead of immediately striking a blow as at first had seemed to be his purpose, he drew back a few paces to hold a whispered consultation with his companions, after which he said,—

"Look here, Hunchie, we're willin' to give you a show, but won't allow no fellers 'round takin' away money we could earn as well as not. Aunt Nancy's always hired us to do her chores when the city folks was here, till she got that feller last year, an' then the old fool said she'd never pay us another cent jest 'cause we didn't jump spry enough to please her. Now we're goin' to show that it's got to be us or nobody. We're willin' to wait till to-morrow night if you say

you'll go then. There's plenty of jobs up Old Orchard way, so there ain't any need of your feedin' on wind."

"Why don't you go there?"

"'Cause we don't want to. This is where we live, an' anything that's to be done 'round here belongs to us. Now cross your throat that you'll leave before to-morrow night, an' we won't say another word."

"I'll go an' see what Aunt Nancy thinks about it," Jack replied, not with any intention of obeying these peremptory demands, but in order to escape from what was a very awkward predicament.

"You won't do anything of the kind! Promise before leavin' this place or we'll thump you!"

"Then thump away, for I won't go," Jack replied determinedly as he backed still farther into the bushes and prepared to defend himself as best he might against such an overwhelming force, although knowing there was no question but that he would receive a severe whipping.

"Give it to him, Bill!" the boys in the rear cried. "You can polish him off with one hand, so there's no need of our chippin' in."

Bill did not wait for further encouragement.

Jack's defence was necessarily very slight, and

before he was able to strike a blow in his own behalf, Bill had him on the ground, pounding him unmercifully, while his companions viewed the scene with evident satisfaction.

Jack made no outcry: first, because he feared that by bringing Aunt Nancy on the scene the fact of Louis's being at the farm would be made known; and, secondly, he fancied Farmer Pratt might be near enough to hear his appeals for help.

Therefore he submitted to the cruel and uncalled-for punishment without a word, although every blow caused severe pain, and when Bill had pummelled him for fully five minutes the other boys interrupted by saying,—

“Come, let up on him! That’s enough for the first, an’ if he ain’t out of town by to-morrow we’ll give him another dose. Let’s cool him off in the pond.”

Jack struggled in vain against this last indignity. It was a simple matter for the three boys to lift and throw him half a dozen feet from the bank into the muddy water.

There was no danger the little fellow would be drowned, for the duck pond was not more than two feet deep, and as his assailants ran hurriedly away he scrambled out, presenting a sorry sight as he stood on the firm ground once more with mud and

water dripping from his face and every angle of his garments.

Jack was as sore in mind as he was in body ; but even while making his way toward the house he did not neglect any precautions which might prevent his being seen by Farmer Pratt.

He skirted around through the straggling line of alders until he reached the rear of the barn, and then, coming across crumple-horn's yard, he was confronted by Aunt Nancy, who had just emerged from the shed.

“ For mercy’s sake ! ” the little woman screamed, raising her hands in dismay as she surveyed the woe-begone Jack, who looked more like a misshapen pillar of mud than a boy. “ Where *have* you been, and what *have* you done to yourself ? It *is* strange that boys *will* be forever mussing in the dirt. I thought I’d had some bad ones here, but you beat anything I ever saw ! Why, you must have been rolling in the pond to get yourself in such a condition.”

“ Yes, ma’am, I *have*, ” Jack replied meekly as he again tried to brush the mud from his face, but only succeeded in grinding it in more deeply.

“ What’s the matter with your nose ? It’s bleeding ! ” Aunt Nancy screamed in her excitement ; while Louis, who was sitting on the grass

near the broad doorstep, crowed and laughed as if fancying she was talking to him.

"Three fellers out there tried to make me promise I'd go away before to-morrow night, an' when I wouldn't, they gave me an awful poundin'. Then the fun was wound up by throwin' me in the pond."

"Three boys!" and Aunt Nancy's tone was an angry one. "I'll venture to say William Dean was among the party; and if he thinks he's going to drive off every decent child in the neighborhood, he is mistaken. I'd do my chores alone, and wait on the city folks too, before he should come here again!"

Then Aunt Nancy peered in every direction as if fancying the evil-doers might yet be in the vicinity where she could punish them immediately, while Jack stood silent, if not quite motionless, wiping the mixture of blood and mud from his face in a most disconsolate manner.

Aunt Nancy's anger vanished, however, as she turned again toward the cripple.

All her sympathies were aroused, but not to such an extent as to smother her cleanly instincts.

"Did they hurt you very much?" she asked solicitously.

"They wasn't any too careful about hittin'," Jack replied with a feeble attempt at a smile, to show that his injuries were not really serious. "If there hadn't been more than one, I'd have hurt him some before he got me into the pond."

"I wish you had flogged every single member of that party in the most severe— No, I don't either, for it wouldn't be right, Jack. We are told when anybody smites us on one cheek, we must turn the other also; but it's terrible hard work to do right sometimes. I'm glad you didn't strike them, though I *do* wish they could be punished."

Again Aunt Nancy showed signs of giving way to anger, and one could see that a severe conflict was going on in her mind as she tried to obey the injunctions of the Book she read so often.

As if to turn her attention from vengeful thoughts, she immediately made preparations for dressing Jack's wounds.

"If you can stand a little more water," she said, "we'll try to get you into something like a decent condition."

"I reckon I can stand almost anything after the dose I've had," Jack replied grimly; and Aunt Nancy led him under the pump, stationing him directly beneath the spout as she said,—

"Now I'll wash the mud off; but if the water feels too cold let me know, and we'll heat it."

"I'll take it as long as you can keep the handle goin'," Jack replied as he bent his head and involuntarily drew a long breath preparatory to receiving the expected shock.

Aunt Nancy could pump a long while when it was for the purpose of removing dirt; and during the next five minutes she deluged Jack with the cold spring water until he stood in the centre of a miniature pond, no longer covered with mud, but dripping tiny streams from every portion of his face and garments.

Sitting on the grass near by, Louis clapped his hands and laughed with glee at what he probably thought a comical spectacle designed for his own especial amusement.

It was not until Jack had been, as he expressed it, "so well rinsed it was time to wring him out," that either he or Aunt Nancy remembered the very important fact that he had no clothes to replace those which were so thoroughly soaked.

"Now what *are* we going to do?" Aunt Nancy asked in dismay, as she surveyed the dripping boy, who left little rivers of water behind him whenever he moved. "You haven't got a second shirt to your back, and I can't let you remain in these wet clothes."

"I might go out to the barn an' lay 'round there till they dried," Jack suggested.

"Mercy on us, child, you'd get your death of cold! Wait right here while I go into the attic and see if there isn't something you can wear for a few hours. Don't step across the threshold."

This last admonition was unnecessary.

Short a time as Jack had known Aunt Nancy, he was reasonably well acquainted with her cleanly habits, and to have stepped on that floor, which was as white as boards can be, while in his present condition, would have been to incur the little woman's most serious displeasure.

He was also forced to remain at a respectful distance from Louis, who laughed and crowed as if begging to be taken, and while moving farther away he whispered,—

"It wouldn't do at all to touch you when I'm so wet, old fellow, but I'll lug you around as much as you want as soon as I'm dried off. After Aunt Nancy comes back, I'm goin' to talk with her about Farmer Pratt, an' see if she'll agree to say we ain't here in case he calls. You an' I'll be in a pretty hard box if she don't promise to tell a lie for us."

CHAPTER VI.

A MENTAL STRUGGLE.

WHEN Aunt Nancy returned from the attic, she had a miscellaneous collection of cast-off garments sufficient to have clothed a dozen boys like Jack, providing they had been willing to wear female apparel.

"I thought there might be some of father's things upstairs," she said, examining once more each piece; "but I've given them away. You won't care if you have to put on a dress for a little while, will you? Here are some old ones of mine, and it will be a great deal better to use them than to stand around in wet clothes."

Jack was not at all anxious to masquerade as a girl, and would have preferred to "dry off," as he expressed it, in the barn; but, fearing lest he should offend the old lady at a time when he was about to ask a very great favor, he made no protest.

Aunt Nancy selected from the assortment two skirts, a pair of well-worn cloth shoes, and a shawl, saying as she handed them to the boy,—

"Now you can go out in the barn and put these on. Then we'll hang your clothes on the line, where they'll dry in a little while. In the mean time I'll find some sticking plaster for your face, and a piece of brown paper to put over your eye to prevent it from growing black."

Jack walked away as if he were about to perform a very disagreeable task, and by the time Aunt Nancy had carried the superfluous wardrobe upstairs and procured such things as she thought would be necessary in the treatment of the boy's wounds, he emerged from the barn looking decidedly shamefaced.

He knew he presented a most comical appearance, and expected to be greeted with an outburst of laughter; but Aunt Nancy saw nothing to provoke mirth in what had been done to prevent a cold, and, in the most matter-of-fact manner, began to treat the bruises on his face.

A piece of court plaster fully half as large as Jack's hand was placed over the scratch on his right cheek, another upon a small cut just in front of his left ear, while a quantity of brown paper thoroughly saturated with vinegar covered his eye and a goodly portion of his forehead.

This last was tied on with a handkerchief knotted in such a manner as to allow the two

ends to stick straight up like the ears of a deformed rabbit.

During this operation Louis laughed in glee. It was to him the jolliest kind of sport to see his guardian thus transformed into a girl, and even Aunt Nancy herself could not repress a smile when she gazed at the woe-begone looking boy who appeared to have just come from some desperate conflict.

"I s'pose I look pretty rough, don't I?" Jack asked with a faint attempt at a smile. "I feel like as if I'd been broke all to pieces an' then patched up ag'in."

"It isn't as bad as it might be," Aunt Nancy replied guardedly; "but out here where we don't see any one it doesn't make much difference, and to run around this way a few hours is better than being sick for a week."

"I reckon I can stand it if you can," Jack said grimly, "but I don't think I want to fix fences in this rig. Them fellers would think I'd put on these things so they wouldn't know me."

"No indeed, you mustn't leave the house even when your clothes are dry, until I have seen that Dean boy's father."

"You ain't goin' to tell him about their poundin' me, are you?" Jack asked quickly.

"Of course I am. You don't suppose for a single moment that I intend to run the chances of your being beaten to death by them! If Mr. Dean can't keep his boy at home I'll—I'll—I don't know what I will do."

"Seems to me it would be better not to say anything about it," Jack replied hesitatingly. "If we go to tellin' tales, them fellers will think I'm afraid, an' be sure to lay for me whenever I go out."

"I'm not going to tell any tales; but I intend to see if it isn't possible for me to have a decent, well-behaved boy around this place without his being obliged to fight a lot of disreputable characters such as some we've got in the neighborhood."

This is not the time for Jack to make any vehement protests, lest Aunt Nancy should be provoked because of his persistency, and he changed the subject of conversation by broaching the matter which occupied all his thoughts.

"That Mr. Pratt what tried to send Louis an' me to the poor farm drove past here with Tom jest before them fellers tackled me, an' I heard him say he was lookin' for us."

"Mercy on me!" Aunt Nancy exclaimed as she pushed the spectacles back from her nose to her

forehead and peered down the lane much as if expecting to see the farmer and his son in the immediate vicinity. "Why *is* he so possessed to send you to the poorhouse?"

"That's what I don't know," Jack replied with a sigh; "but he's after us, an' if he once gets his eye on me, the thing is settled."

"He has no more right to bother you than I have, and not half as much. According to your story, he didn't even take the trouble to give you a decent meal, and I'll soon let him know he can't carry you away from here."

"But how'll you prevent it if he starts right in an' begins to lug us off? He's stronger'n you an' me put together, an' if he's come all this distance there won't be much stoppin' for anything you'll say to him, I'm afraid. Now don't you think it would be better to tell him I wasn't here?"

"Mercy on us, Jack! How could I do that when you *are* here?"

"Well, you wouldn't like to have him lug us off if you knew we'd got to go to the poorhouse, would you? 'Cause neither Louis nor me ever did anything to you, or to him either."

"But you sha'n't go there, my dear child. So long as I am willing to keep you here, I don't see what business it is of his, or anybody else's."

"It seems as though he was makin' it his business," Jack replied disconsolately; for he was now beginning to despair of persuading Aunt Nancy to tell a lie. "If you'd say we wasn't here, that would settle it, and he wouldn't stay."

"But I can't, Jack; I can't tell an absolute falsehood."

Jack gave vent to a long-drawn sigh as he looked toward the baby for a moment, and then said,—

"Well, I didn't s'pose you would do it anyhow, so Louis an' me'll have to start off, 'cause I won't go to that poor farm if I have to walk every step of the way to New York an' carry the baby besides."

"I don't see why you should talk like that, my child. In the first place, there is no reason for believing that hard-hearted man will come here, and —"

"Oh, yes, there is!" and Jack repeated the conversation he had overheard while hiding in the alder-bushes. "When he finds out we haven't been to Biddeford, he'll ask at every house on the way back."

"Do you really think he would try to take you if I said to him in a very severe tone that I would have him prosecuted for attempting anything of the kind?"

"I don't believe you could scare him a bit, an' there isn't much chance you'd be able to stop him after he's come so far to find us."

"But I can't have you leave me, Jack," the little woman said in a quavering voice. "You have no idea how much I've been countin' on your company."

"You won't feel half so bad as I shall to go," Jack replied mournfully.

"But it is out of the question to even think of walking all that distance."

"It's got to be done jest the same, an' as soon as my clothes are dried we'll start. Things will come mighty tough; but they can't be helped."

Aunt Nancy looked thoroughly distressed, and there was a suspicious moisture in her eyes as she asked,—

"How would it do to lock the doors, and refuse to come down when he knocked?"

Jack shook his head.

"I don't believe it would work."

"No, it mustn't be thought of, for then we should be acting a lie, which is almost, if not quite, as bad as telling one."

"How do you make that out?" Jack asked in surprise.

"We shouldn't lock the doors unless it was to

give him the impression that there was no one at home, which would be a falsehood."

The expression on Jack's face told that he failed to understand either the argument or the spirit which prompted it, and for several moments no word was spoken.

Then, as a happy thought occurred to him, the boy said eagerly,—

"I'll tell you how it could be done without any lie at all, an' everything would go along as slick as grease."

"How?" Aunt Nancy asked quickly, as a look of relief passed over her face.

"I'll watch up the road a piece till I see the team comin'. Then I'll run back here, get Louis, an' carry him off somewhere."

"Well?" the little woman asked as he paused.

"Why, can't you see how easy it'll be then? You'll only have to tell him you don't know where we are, an' he'll be bound to leave."

"But, Jack dear, I should know where you were."

"How do you make that out?"

"You wouldn't leave the farm, an' while I—"

"That's jest what you don't know. I didn't tell you where we'd go. It would be the same thing if we left for New York this minute; you

might think we was on the road somewhere ; but that wouldn't make it so."

Aunt Nancy remained silent, and although he did not believe she was convinced, Jack fancied there was a look of hesitation on her face as if she might be persuaded into complying with his request, therefore he added eagerly,—

" You want us to stay here, an' — "

" Indeed I do ! " the little woman replied fervently. " I never knew a boy who seemed so much like our own folks as you do, and since last night it has been a great relief to think I should have you with me this summer."

" And if Mr. Pratt knows we're anywhere around, he'll snake us away for certain."

" I don't understand how that can be done, Jack."

" Neither do I ; but he has come to do it, an' you can't stop him. Now I'll promise to go where you'd never guess of our bein', an' then there wouldn't be the least little bit of a lie in sayin' you didn't know."

" I would do almost anything for the sake of keeping you here, Jack, except to commit a sin."

" This way you won't be doin' anything of the kind. I reckon my clothes are dry now, an' I'd better put 'em on so's to be ready to watch for Mr. Pratt."

Then Jack hurried off as if the matter had been positively settled.

Aunt Nancy gazed after him with an expression of mingled pain and perplexity on her wrinkled face, and just then Louis crept to her knee, beginning in his odd language to be taken on her lap.

“ You dear little creature ! ” she cried, pressing him to her bosom while he chattered and laughed. “ It would be cruel to send you among the paupers, when a lonely old woman like me loves you so much ! ”

Jack looked back just in time to see this picture, and there was no longer any doubt in his mind but that Aunt Nancy would accede to his request.

Five minutes later he returned clad in his own garments, which looked considerably the worse for the hasty drying, and said as he ran swiftly past the little woman,—

“ Don’t let Louis go into the house, for I’ll want to get hold of him in a hurry ! ”

Aunt Nancy began to make some remark ; but he was moving so swiftly that the words were unheard, and the old lady said to herself with a long-drawn sigh as she pressed the baby yet more closely,—

“ I’m afraid it is wrong to do as he wishes ; but how can I allow cruel men to take this dear child

from me, when I know he will not be cared for properly?"

Then she began to think the matter over more calmly, and each moment it became clearer to her mind that by acceding to Jack's request she would be evading the truth, if not absolutely telling a lie.

"I can't do it," she said, kissing the baby affectionately. "Much as I shall grieve over them, it is better they should go than for me to do what I know to be wrong."

Having thus decided, she hurried up the lane to warn Jack; but before reaching the road the boy was met coming at full speed.

"Mr. Pratt has just shown up at the top of the hill; he's stoppin' at the house over there! I'll get Louis and hide."

"But, Jack dear, I have been thinking this matter over, and I can't even act a lie."

"Why didn't you say so before, when I had a chance to get away?" he cried reproachfully. "By lettin' me think you'd do it, you've got us into a reg'lar trap!"

The boy did not wait to hear her reply, but ran to where Louis was seated contentedly on the grass, raised him in his arms and disappeared behind the barn, leaving the little woman feeling very much like a culprit.

CHAPTER VII.

FARMER PRATT.

AUNT NANCY was now in a fine state of perplexity.

Jack's reproachful tone had cut very deeply, and she began to consider herself responsible for all which might happen because of not having warned him in time.

"I'm a wicked woman," she said, wringing her hands distractedly, "and accountable for all that happens now. Why was I so weak as not to give the dear boy a decided answer when he came from the barn?"

Then she ran to the bars and called after Jack in a whisper; but if any one had asked why she wanted him to come back just at that time, she could not have explained.

Returning to the old oak, she was about to sit down again when the rattle of wheels told that Farmer Pratt was near at hand.

Hardly aware of what she did, the little woman went hurriedly into the house, and there awaited

what must necessarily be a very painful interview.

A few moments later the man whom Jack looked upon as a merciless enemy knocked at the door, and Aunt Nancy said feebly, "Come in."

Farmer Pratt entered without very much ceremony, and as the little woman gazed at his face she fancied, probably from what Jack had told her, that it was possible to see covetousness and hard-heartedness written on every feature.

He did not remove his hat, but stood in the centre of the floor, whip in hand, as he said,—

"Mornin' ma'am, mornin'. I'm from Scarborough, an' my name is Nathan Pratt. P'rhaps you've heard of me."

Aunt Nancy was about to say she never had, meaning that her neighbors never had spoken of him as a person of importance; but she checked herself on remembering this would be a falsehood because of what Jack had said.

"I have heard the name," she replied faintly.

"I thought so, I thought so. I've lived, man an' boy, in Scarborough for nigh on to fifty years, an' when that's been done without givin' anybody a chance to say a word agin me, except that I want my own, as other folks do, then it

would be kinder strange if I wasn't known within a dozen miles of home."

"Was that all you came here to say?" Aunt Nancy asked.

"Of course not,—of course not"; and the farmer seated himself without waiting for an invitation. "The fact of the matter is, ma'am, I'm huntin' for a couple of children what drifted ashore on my place the other day. One of 'em was a hunchback, an' I must say he is bad, for after eatin' all the food in my house that he an' the young one wanted, he run away, leavin' me in the lurch."

"I don't suppose they stole it, did they?" and Aunt Nancy spoke very sharply, for it made her angry to hear such things said about Jack.

"No, it wasn't exactly that," and the farmer hesitated, as if to give her the impression something equally wrong had been done by the boy; "but as a citizen of the town I don't want it said we let a couple of youngsters run around loose like calves."

"What do you intend to do with them?" the little woman asked severely.

Farmer Pratt had no idea of telling a secret which he believed would be worth at least an hundred dollars to him, and by keeping it he again defeated himself.

"They oughter be carried to the poor farm till we can find out who owns 'em. You see I'm as big a tax-payer as there is in Scarborough, an' if any other town takes care of the children, we're likely to be sued for the cost of keepin'. Now I don't believe in goin' to law, for it's dreadful expensive, so I've come out to save myself an' my neighbors what little money I can."

If Farmer Pratt had told the truth, Aunt Nancy would have done all in her power to aid him, and Jack could not but have rejoiced, although the farmer received a rich reward; but by announcing what was a false proposition, he aroused the little woman's wrath.

She no longer remembered that it was wrong even to act a lie, and thought only of the possibility that those whom she had learned to love were really to be taken to the refuge for paupers, if her visitor should be so fortunate as to find them.

"It seems hard to put children in such a place," she said, with an effort to appear calm.

"That's only prejudice, ma'am, sheer prejudice. What do we keep up sich institoots for? Why, to prevent one man from bein' obligeed to spend more'n another when a lot of beggars come around."

"And yet it seems as if almost any one would

be willing to feed a couple of children who were lost."

"There's where you are makin' a mistake ag'in, ma'am. Youngsters eat more'n grown folks, an' I know what I'm talkin' about, 'cause I've raised a family. Heaven helps them as helps themselves, an' when we find two like the one I'm huntin' for, then I say since heaven won't take a hand at it, the town should."

Aunt Nancy remained silent, but those who knew her intimately would have said, because of the manner in which she moved her chair to and fro, that the little woman was struggling very hard to "rule her spirit."

"I don't reckon you know anything about 'em, ma'am," Farmer Pratt said after a long pause, during which Aunt Nancy had rocked violently, with her gaze fixed upon an overbold honey bee who was intent on gathering the sweets from a honeysuckle blossom which the wind had forced through the open window.

"I know this much," she replied with vehemence, "that I hope you won't find the children if it is simply to carry them to the poor farm. We are told of the reward which —"

"Who said anything about a reward?" the farmer asked in alarm, fearing that which he

wished should remain a secret was already known.

“The Book tells us what shall be the reward of those who give a cup of cold water only to these His little ones—”

“Oh! is that it?” and the visitor appeared greatly relieved. “I count myself about as good as my neighbors, but when it comes to keepin’ a parcel of children, after I’ve paid my taxes to run a place especially for sich as they, then I say it’s a clear waste of money, an’ that’s as much of a sin as anything else.”

“We won’t argue the matter,” the little woman replied with dignity, “but I hope the time will never come that I, poor as I am, can count the pennies in a dollar when it is a question of giving aid or comfort to the distressed.”

“Since you haven’t seen the youngsters, there’s no need of my stayin’ any longer, ma’am, but it does seem funny that nobody has run across ’em, when I heard for a fact that they’d come up this road.”

Aunt Nancy knew full well that by remaining silent now, she was giving the visitor to understand she knew nothing about the missing ones; but just at the moment she would have told a deliberate lie rather than give Jack and Louis up

to such a man, however much she might have regretted it afterward.

"Of course there's no harm in my askin' the questions," Farmer Pratt said as he moved toward the door, feeling decidedly uncomfortable in mind because of the little woman's sharp words.

"Certainly not; but at the same time I am sorry you came."

"Why, ma'am?"

"Because I have learned how hard-hearted men can be when it is a question of a few dollars. If the children should come to me, they would be given a home, such as it is, until their relatives could be found."

"If they should come, I warn you that it is your duty to let me know, for they drifted ashore on my property, an' I've got the first claim."

This was rather more than meek little Aunt Nancy could endure; but she succeeded in checking the angry words, and rose from her chair to intimate that the interview was at an end.

Farmer Pratt went out very quickly, probably fearing he might hear more unpalatable truths, and the old lady watched him until he drove away.

"It was wicked, but I'm glad I did it!" she said emphatically. "The idea of hunting up such children as Jack and Louis simply to send them among paupers!"

Not for many moments did the little woman remain in this frame of mind.

After a time she began to realize that she had done exactly what she told Jack would be impossible — acted a lie, and her conscience began to trouble her greatly.

She tried to read a chapter in the Book with the hope of finding something to comfort her, and, failing in this, her thoughts went out to the children who had left so suddenly.

“Mercy on us!” she exclaimed. “Suppose Jack really has gone away, believing I would tell that man all I knew about him!”

This idea was sufficient to arouse her to action, and she went behind the barn, where she called softly, —

“Jack! Jack! Where are you?”

Not until this very feeble outcry had been repeated half a dozen times did she receive any reply, and then the hunchback, with Louis clasped in his arms, peered out from among the bushes.

“Has the farmer gone?” he asked in a whisper.

“Indeed he has.”

“And you didn’t tell him where we was?”

“He never asked the question; but all the same, Jack dear, I did wrong in allowing him to suppose I knew nothing about you.”

"You're the sweetest aunt any feller ever had," the hunchback said heartily as he came swiftly up and kissed one of the old lady's wrinkled hands before she was aware of his intentions. "I couldn't believe you wanted us taken to the poorhouse, so I didn't go very far off."

"I almost wish I hadn't done it, for— No, I don't either! After talking with that wretch it would have broken my heart to see him take you away! Give me the baby this minute; it seems as if I hadn't seen him for a week."

Jack willingly relinquished his charge to the motherly arms extended to receive the laughing child, and said, as Aunt Nancy almost smothered Louis with kisses,—

"You sha'n't ever be sorry for what you have done. I'll work awful hard, an' take care of the baby whenever you've got somethin' else to do."

"I know you are a good boy, Jack, and I wouldn't undo what's been done if I could; but at the same time my conscience will reproach me, for I realize that I acted wickedly."

So far as the sin was concerned, Jack did not think it of great importance, and wondered not a little that as good a woman as Aunt

Nancy should attach so much importance to what, in his mind at least, was nothing more than a charitable act.

He took care not to give expression to his thoughts, however, and led the way back to the old oak-tree, where he said,—

“ You sit down here awhile, an’ I’ll go out to make certain that man has gone. It might be he’s waitin’ ’round somewhere to find whether we’re really here.”

“ I don’t think there is any danger of that,” Aunt Nancy replied as she seated herself on the bench and fondled Louis until the little fellow was tired of caresses.

Jack could not be comfortable in mind unless positive his enemy had left the vicinity, and he walked quite a long distance up the road before convincing himself of the fact.

When he returned the desire to make himself necessary to the little woman was stronger than ever, and he proposed to finish the work of fence mending at once.

“ Better wait till after dinner now that it is so near noon,” she said. “ We’ll have a quiet talk, and then I will start the fire.”

“ Is it about Farmer Pratt you want to say something?”

"No, we'll try to put him out of our minds. It is the baby."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He must have another frock and some clothes. These are very dirty, and I'm afraid he'd take cold if I should wash them at night, and put them on again in the morning."

"Haven't you got an old dress like the one I wore? By pinnin' it up he'd get along all right."

"Indeed he wouldn't, Jack. Boys can't be expected to know what a child needs; but it puzzles me how to get the material from the store."

"What's the matter with my goin' after it?"

"It is a very long distance—more than four miles away."

"That's all right; I walked a good deal farther the day I came here. Jest say what you want, an' I'll go after it now."

"Do you really think you could get back before sunset?"

"I'm certain of it, providin' I don't wait for dinner."

"But you must have something to eat, Jack dear."

"I can take a slice of bread and butter in my hand, an' that'll last me more'n four miles."

"I have half a mind to let you go," Aunt Nancy said as if to herself, and Jack insisted so strongly that she finally decided he should do the shopping.

Not one, but half a dozen slices of bread were spread thickly with butter as a dinner for the messenger, and then the little woman wrote on a slip of paper the different articles she needed.

"You must see that Mr. Treat gives you exactly what I've asked for," she said as she read the list, and explained what the texture or color of each article should be. "Watch him closely, and be sure he makes the right change."

Then she gave him the most minute directions as to the road, the time which should be occupied in the journey, and the manner the goods were to be brought home.

A basket was provided for the purchases, and Aunt Nancy said as she gave Jack a ten-dollar note,—

"Tie that in your handkerchief so's to be sure not to lose it, Jack dear, for it's a great deal of money to a lone woman like me."

He promised to be careful, and kissed the baby good by.

Aunt Nancy leaned over for the same salute, and when it had been given she said in a sorrowful tone,—

“It is a deal of comfort to have you with me, Jack; but I do wish I had been bold enough to tell that man the truth, and then refused to let you go with him.”

“It’s lucky you didn’t, Aunt Nancy, for he’d been bound to have us any way.”

Then Jack walked swiftly down the daisy-embroidered lane, thinking he was a very fortunate boy indeed in having found such a good friend as the sweet-faced old lady.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SECOND WARNING.

TRUE to his promise, Jack returned before the sun was very low in the western sky, and Aunt Nancy expressed the greatest surprise at seeing him so soon.

"When I send William Dean to the store he needs all day for the journey, and on two or three occasions it has been late in the evening before he came back."

"It isn't such an awful long walk, but it makes a feller kinder tired, an' I s'pose he had to rest a good while before startin' back. I thought I'd better come the minute the things were ready, 'cause I was afraid you'd do the milkin'."

"Of course I shall. You don't suppose I'd let you work after that terribly long walk."

"But I'm goin' to do the chores jest the same," Jack replied; and to prove his words he carried in the kindlings for morning.

Aunt Nancy was perfectly satisfied with the purchases he made, and until it was time to

bring the cow up from pasture she explained her intentions in the way of making clothes for Louis.

"This piece of calico isn't as pretty as some I've had from Treat's," she said, unfolding the goods, "but it seems to be a good quality, and that's the main thing. Now, the question is whether I shall make his frock with a yoke, or plain? What do you think, Jack dear?"

Jack hadn't the faintest idea of what she meant by a "yoke" or a "frock," but, wishing to please the little woman by giving an opinion, he answered decidedly,—

"I should make it plain."

"That was just my idea. How queer it is that you should know all about such things, and have good judgment too!"

Jack came very near smiling because of this praise which he did not deserve, but was wise enough not to make any reply, and Aunt Nancy consulted him on every detail until the garment had been fully decided upon.

Then it was time to attend to old crumple-horn, and when Jack came into the kitchen again supper was on the table.

In view of the fact that he had had such a long tramp, the little woman insisted on his retiring

very early, and the Book was opened as soon as the supper-table had been cleared.

On this day Aunt Nancy's evening devotions occupied an unusually long time, and she prayed fervently to be forgiven for her sin of the forenoon,—a fact which caused Jack to say when she had finished,—

“It don't seem to me as if you could ever do anything wicked, Aunt Nancy, an' there ain't any need of fussing about what you said to Farmer Pratt, for God knows jest how good you are.”

“You mustn't talk like that, Jack dear. There are very many times when I give way to anger or impatience, and there can be no question but that I as much as told a lie when that man was here.”

Jack would have protested that no wrong had been done, but she prevented further conversation by kissing him on both cheeks as she said, “Good night.”

On the following morning, Aunt Nancy's “man of all work” took good care she should not be the first one awake.

He arose as the rays of the coming sun were glinting the eastern sky, and when the little woman entered the kitchen the fire had

been built, the floor swept, and the morning's milk in the pail ready for straining.

Her surprise at what he had done was sufficient reward for Jack, and he resolved that she should never have an opportunity to do such work while he was sleeping.

"I begin to feel quite like a visitor," the little woman said with a cheery laugh as she bustled around in her sparrow-like fashion, preparing breakfast. "This is the first time in a great many years that the fire has been made and the milking done before I got up."

Thanks to Jack's labors, the morning meal was unusually early, and when it had been eaten and the dishes washed, the hunchback said as he took up his hat,—

"I'll go now an' finish mendin' the fence."

"Wait until I have seen Mr. Dean. I'm afraid those dreadful boys will do you some mischief."

"I don't reckon they'll be stirring so early, an' it won't take me more 'n an hour longer. While I'm gone, think of somethin' else that needs to be done, for I'd rather be workin' than layin' still."

"You're a good boy, Jack dear, and I should be very sorry to have you go away from me now."

"There's no danger of that yet awhile, unless Mr. Pratt takes it into his head to come this way again," Jack replied with a laugh as he left the house.

It required some search to find the hammer and nails he had thrown down when he was so frightened, and then the task of fence mending progressed famously until a rustling among the bushes caused him to raise his eyes suddenly.

Bill Dean stood before him, looking particularly savage and threatening.

Jack took a yet firmer grasp of the hammer, resolved to defend himself vigorously providing there should be no other enemies in the vicinity.

"So you're still here, eh?" Bill asked sternly.

"Looks like it I reckon."

"When are you goin'?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind; but I'll write an' tell you before I pack my trunk."

Bill stepped forward quickly, but Jack persuaded him to go back by swinging the hammer unpleasantly near the bully's head as he said,—

"Don't come too near! You served me out yesterday because there was three in the gang, an' I hadn't anything to defend myself with; but now matters are a little different."

"Are you goin' to leave this place to-day?" Bill asked, as he retreated a few paces.

"No, nor to-morrow either."

"Then remember what I say. This is the second warnin' you've had, an' it'll be the last. Look out for trouble if you're in this town to-night!"

"I shall be here, an' I want you to remember that somebody besides me may get into trouble if there's any funny business. Aunt Nancy threatened to tell your father about what was done yesterday, but I coaxed her not to, an' I won't say a word another time."

"I don't mind what she says, we'll run you out of this place before two days go by, so take care of yourself."

"That's jest what I count on doin', an' if you've got any sense you'll keep away from me."

Bill shook his fist threateningly as near Jack's nose as he thought prudent, and disappeared among the bushes, leaving the hunchback decidedly disturbed in mind despite the bold front he had assumed.

"Them fellers can make it hot for me, of course," he said to himself when the bully had gone, "an' I expect I shall catch it rough, but almost anything is better than leavin' here after Aunt Nancy has fixed it so nice with Farmer Pratt."

He worked more rapidly after receiving this second warning, and returned to the house by the main road instead of going around past the frog pond.

The little woman was under the old oak making Louis's new garments when he arrived, and she saw at once by the troubled expression on his face that something had gone wrong.

"What's the matter, Jack dear?" she asked kindly.

"Matter? I guess I don't know what you mean."

"Indeed you do, so now tell Aunt Nancy all about it. Have you seen that Dean boy again to-day?"

Jack was forced to confess he had, and in a few moments the little woman succeeded in learning the whole story.

She insisted that it was necessary for her to see Bill's father at once; but the hunchback begged her not to do anything of the kind, and she apparently abandoned the idea.

"Why is it you don't want me to go?" she finally asked.

"Because when any fuss is raised about me, I'm afraid it'll come to Farmer Pratt's ears somehow, an' he'll be over here again."

“I wish he would, for then I could confess to him that I the same as told a lie, and defy any one to take you children from me.”

“When that time comes we shall have to go,” Jack replied despondently; and Aunt Nancy endeavored to cheer him by displaying Louis’s frock, which was rapidly approaching completion.

During the remainder of the day Jack busied himself around the farm at such chores as he or Aunt Nancy could find, and when night came nothing had been heard of those who insisted he must leave the town.

The baby sat under the old oak during the evening in all the bravery of his new dress, and Aunt Nancy discussed the subject-matter of her proposed letter to “Brother Abner” until it was time to retire.

Then Jack went into his tiny room with a heart full of thankfulness that his lines “had been cast in such pleasant places,” and it seemed as if his eyes had but just closed in slumber when he was awakened by the pressure of a soft hand on his face.

Fear would have caused him to rise to a sitting posture very suddenly but for the fact that the same gentle pressure forced him to remain in a reclining position, and then he heard a familiar voice whisper,—

"O Jack dear, burglars are trying to get into the house! What *shall* we do?"

He was now thoroughly awake, and as the hand was removed from his mouth he asked in a low tone,—

"Are you certain of that?"

"Absolutely. I thought I heard an unusual noise, and looked out when— There! *Do* you hear that?"

"It would be strange if I didn't," Jack replied as the creaking of the shed door swinging back on its hinges sounded remarkably loud and harsh on the still night air. "I'll get right up; go downstairs and wait for me."

"It will be better if I stay in the hall-way," Aunt Nancy said in a voice, the tremor of which told that she was thoroughly frightened.

Never before had Jack dressed so quickly, and as he did he tried to think what course should be pursued.

There seemed to be no question but that burglars were on the premises, and to encounter them single-handed and alone would be the height of folly.

As may be fancied, he had not made a very elaborate toilet when he joined Aunt Nancy at the head of the stairs.

It was sufficient that he had on enough clothing to admit of his going out of doors without danger of taking cold.

"Have you got a gun or a pistol?" he asked of the little woman who was shivering with fear as if with an ague fit.

"No indeed, I never would dare to sleep in the same house with such things."

"What have you that I can use as a weapon?"

"There isn't a single article in this house which is dangerous except the carving knife, and that is very dull."

"It will be better than nothing."

"But you surely don't intend to go out there when desperate men may be laying in wait to take your life!"

"Something must be done; we can't stay shut up here and allow them to do as they please."

"But you'll be killed, Jack dear"; and poor old Aunt Nancy clung to the boy in a frenzy of fear. "To think that I've been expecting something of the kind all my life, and it has come at last!"

A sound as if the shed door had been closed told Jack he was wasting what might be precious time.

"Get the carving knife quick," he whispered, "and when I go out lock the door after me."

Aunt Nancy obeyed in silence.

She brought the knife much as though it was the deadliest of weapons, and put it in Jack's hands with something very like awe.

"Don't kill the men if you can help it," she whispered. "It would be better to frighten them very badly rather than stain your hands with blood."

Jack made no reply; but the thought came into his mind that he would stand a poor chance of frightening a burglar, with nothing but the well-worn knife.

He opened the door softly.

Aunt Nancy stood ready to close and lock it instantly he was on the outside, and the decisive moment had arrived.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ALARM.

IT must be confessed that Jack was not at all eager to face the alleged burglars.

He knew very well that if there were no more than two he would stand a slim chance of driving them away, and even one good-sized man might make it very uncomfortable for him.

Had he been left to follow his own inclinations, the outer door would not have been opened, but he knew Aunt Nancy depended upon him for protection, and he must make a reputation for courage or be disgraced in her eyes.

The sky was overcast with clouds, and Jack could not distinguish objects ten paces away as he stepped on to the broad stone in front of the door.

He heard the key turn in the lock behind him, and this was sufficient to tell him he need not expect any assistance from the little woman inside.

Grasping the carving knife firmly, he moved

forward slowly in the direction of the shed, and saw a shadowy form dart around the corner of the building.

Then another, or the same one, returned, approached Jack, and stooped over as if in the act of placing something on the ground.

An instant later the shadow had disappeared, and Jack saw before him a thin line of sparks, apparently coming from the solid earth, but not sufficiently large to cast any light.

Quite naturally Jack's first thought was that the miscreants were trying to set the buildings on fire, and he ran forward to extinguish what seemed ready to burst into a flame, when there was a muffled report, the ground appeared to be a mass of coals, while at the same time a soft, sticky substance was thrown in a shower upon him.

Jack leaped back in surprise and alarm, and as he did so struck his foot against some obstruction with sufficient power to throw him headlong.

The explosion, the sudden glare of light, and the shower of he knew not what, all served to bewilder the boy to such an extent that for the moment it seemed as if the same force which caused the report had knocked him down.

The first idea which came into his mind was

that he had been shot, for he remembered having heard that the victim does not feel pain for some time after a bullet enters his body, and the sticky substance on his face he thought must be blood.

"That Bill Dean meant what he said, an' has commenced drivin' me out of town," he muttered to himself, making not the slightest effort to rise, because he believed it impossible to do so.

The silence was almost oppressive after the loud report.

Jack could hear nothing to denote that there was any one in the vicinity, and was feeling of his limbs to ascertain the amount of injury done, when a shrill, tremulous voice from the doorway cried,—

"Jack! Jack dear! Are you hurt much?"

"I'm afraid I'm shot. It seems as if I was bleedin' dreadful!"

"Wait till I can light the lantern, my poor boy"; and the door was closed and locked again.

By this time Jack had fully persuaded himself he was seriously wounded, and wondered how long it would be before the pain came.

Two minutes later Aunt Nancy, partially dressed and with an odd little lantern in her hand, emerged very cautiously from the house.

The fear Jack might be fatally injured was greater than that of the supposed burglars. Her desire to aid others conquered her timidity, and the only thought was to bring relief as speedily as possible.

"Mercy on us! What a dreadful thing!" Aunt Nancy exclaimed as she arrived at the place where Jack was lying at full length on the ground. "Tell me where you are hurt, my poor child."

"I don't know; but it seems as if somethin' tough must have happened, for I'm bleedin' terribly."

The little woman knelt by his side, and held the lantern up until its rays illumined the boy's face.

"I can't see any blood, Jack dear; but you seem to be literally covered with something yellow."

The boy passed his hand over his face, scraping off the supposed sanguinary fluid, and examined it carefully by aid of the light.

Then he leaped to his feet very quickly, looking both ashamed and angry.

"It's some kind of a trick Bill Dean's gang have been playing!" he cried, and at that instant from behind the barn came a shout of derision, followed by hearty laughter.

"Oh, I wish I was strong enough to flog those wicked wretches!" Aunt Nancy said, her eyes filling with tears of vexation.

Jack made no reply.

He had taken the lantern from her hand, and was searching carefully in the immediate vicinity.

It was not long before he and Aunt Nancy decided that the yellow substance was the seeds and pulp of a pumpkin, and Jack said, as he picked up several pieces of red paper,—

"Now I know what it means. Those fellers have dug the inside out of a pumpkin, and put into it a big fire-cracker. They waited until I came near the shed before lighting it, an', of course, when the thing exploded it sent the stuff flyin'."

"Thank goodness it was no worse!" the little woman added, and Jack burst into a hearty laugh.

Despite the suffering caused by fear, the idea that he had been scared almost into dying by an exploded pumpkin was comical in the extreme, and his mirth was not checked until Aunt Nancy asked quite sharply,—

"What on earth are you laughing at?"

"To think how frightened we got about nothing."

"I'm sure it was a good deal. Here we've been forced out of our beds at this hour of the

night, believing burglars were around, and then scared nearly to death because it appeared as if you were wounded, all on account of those terrible boys who wanted to have some sport!"

"It can't be helped now, an' the sooner you get into the house the less will be the chances of your taking cold," Jack replied, checking his mirth with difficulty as he saw how angry Aunt Nancy really was.

Although it was a practical joke which had caused a great deal of mental anxiety for a short time, he could not look upon it otherwise than as funny, except when he realized that this was the first step taken to drive him out of the town.

The little woman insisted on examining the interior of the shed to learn if the boys had done any further mischief, and they found fragments of pumpkin and paper, showing that the "infernal machine" had been constructed there.

Nothing appeared to have been disturbed, and the two who had been so unceremoniously awakened returned to the house after the pulp was scraped with a chip from Jack's face, hair, and clothing.

It was a long time before the boy could induce slumber to visit his eyelids again that night, but he finally succeeded with such good effect that he

did not awaken until the noise Aunt Nancy made while building the fire aroused him.

Dressing hurriedly, he went downstairs in time to do a portion of the work, and when the milk was brought into the house after old crumple-horn had been driven to pasture, Aunt Nancy asked,—

“Do you think you could take care of Louis a little while this forenoon?”

“Of course I can. Are you going visitin’?”

“Yes; I intend to see if something can’t be done to prevent those wretched boys from carrying on in this manner.”

“But, Aunt Nancy—”

“Now don’t say a word, Jack dear. Things were very much like this last summer when I hired a boy from Portland, and no one can tell what might have happened if he hadn’t run away. I know it is wrong to get angry, but I can’t help it. Seems to me I am growing more wicked every day; yesterday I just the same as told a lie, and last night I did not control my angry passions.”

“But, Aunt Nancy—”

“Don’t try to argue with me, or I shall get worse. I am going to see Mr. Dean at once, and you must keep house till I come back.”

Louis's guardian realized that words would be worse than useless at such a time, and he wisely refrained from speaking, while Aunt Nancy, as if trying hard to keep her temper within bounds, did the morning work in ominous silence.

When the last duty had been performed, she directed Jack to take the baby out under the old oak, and then disappeared for half an hour or more, at the end of which time she reappeared dressed with scrupulous neatness, but in the quaintest of fashions.

"I sha'n't be away more than an hour; and if any of those boys show themselves, be sure to go into the house with Louis at once."

Saying this, she walked swiftly down the lane, and Jack muttered to himself as she turned the corner into the main road,—

"I'm mighty sorry she's bent on anything of the kind, for I'm certain there'll be trouble for me come out of it."

Fortunately nothing occurred to cause alarm during the little woman's absence.

Jack amused the baby, split more kindlings and piled them up in the shed, being thus occupied when Aunt Nancy returned, looking mildly triumphant.

"There!" she said in a tone of satisfaction as

she seated herself beneath the old oak and fanned her heated face with a tiny pocket-handkerchief, "I did control my temper, and I don't think the Dean boy will trouble either of us again."

"Did you tell his father?"

"I gave him a full account of all which had been done, both this summer and last. Mr. Dean has promised me nothing of the kind shall ever happen again, and we are free from that annoyance."

Jack thought, but did not venture to put it into words, that Bill Dean would not give up the struggle so easily, and felt convinced there was yet more serious trouble in store for him before the summer came to an end.

"Do you know, Jack dear, I would give almost anything in the world if I hadn't told a lie to Mr. Pratt. We should have stood our ground, and defied him to take you and the baby away, rather than commit a sin."

"But I can't see that you were so very wicked, Aunt Nancy. He would have carried us off in spite of anything you could say, an' I'm sure you didn't tell a lie."

"It is on my conscience just the same, Jack dear, and I shall never feel easy in mind," the little woman replied with a long-drawn sigh.

Jack was really distressed because Aunt Nancy should regret so deeply what was done in his behalf; but he could think of nothing consoling to say, since she insisted on believing a downright falsehood had been told.

"I am also to be condemned for having given way to my temper; but those boys do try it so severely it is very difficult to remember that he who 'rules his spirit is better than he who taketh a city.' "

Jack looked up in bewilderment.

He did not understand the application of the quotation, and the remark about taking a city mystified him.

Aunt Nancy was so intent on her own sad thoughts that she paid no attention to his perplexity, and after a long silence entered the house, returning a few moments later in her home costume, which the boy thought more becoming than the antiquated finery she had been arrayed in for the call on Bill Dean's father.

The little woman did not give Jack the details of her visit to Mr. Dean; but he felt more confident than ever that it was an ill-advised move, so far as his own peace was concerned, and but a little time was to elapse before this was to be proven.

"I believe I will send a line to Brother Abner now," Aunt Nancy suddenly said. "It is time he learned what has happened; and since we have no pressing work on hand, you can mind the baby. It isn't as easy for me to write letters as it used to be. I need a long while in which to compose my thoughts."

Then the little woman set about the task, and it could be seen it was a hard one by the manner in which she began.

Watching through the open window, Jack saw her bring pens, paper, and ink from her chamber to the kitchen, and then nibble at the end of her penholder as if to derive inspiration from that source.

Had it been some weighty document of state she could not have been more particular, and fully two hours were spent before the labor was completed.

"Took me a long while, didn't it?" she asked on coming into the yard once more. "I believe I've told Abner the whole story, and we'll soon know if the baby's parents are yet alive."

"Shall I carry it to the post-office?"

"Mercy! no. It is in Treat's store, and I couldn't think of letting you take that long walk again to-day."

“It won’t hurt me a bit.”

“You must stay here quietly with me, and tomorrow perhaps you shall go. There is plenty of time, and who knows if Abner is home now; he’s a master hand at gadding about, which accounts for his being so poor. I’ve always told him that ‘a rolling stone gathers no moss,’ but he laughs it off by saying he doesn’t want to be moss-grown.”

CHAPTER X.

SICKNESS.

Now that the important letter had been written, Aunt Nancy was in no hurry to mail it.

She acted very much as if believing the children would be lost to her immediately after Abner learned the news, and it was simply a case of "deferring the evil day."

During the afternoon Jack further endeared himself to the little woman's heart by patching up the door of the shed in such a manner that it could not be opened readily, and fastening it with an old padlock he found in the barn.

"That is just what I have been wanting for a long time," Aunt Nancy exclaimed in surprise when he called her to see the result of his labors. "How strange I can't do that as well as you!"

"That's because you're a woman," Jack replied, not a little delighted with the praise bestowed upon him.

"It may be; but I'm so very much older, it seems as if I should be able to do such things properly, and yet I can't even drive a nail."

"There'll be no need of your doin' it while I'm 'round."

"And I hope you and Louis will stay a long time; but I suppose it isn't right to say so, for although there isn't any chance his mother can be alive after the ship exploded, he has probably relatives who want to see him."

During the remainder of the day, Jack assisted the little woman with the housework, and at sunset the two sat in the favorite place under the old oak, until Louis became unusually fretful.

After trying in vain to soothe him, Aunt Nancy insisted they should retire, saying as she went toward the house,—

"I am afraid he doesn't feel very well. Are you sure he didn't play in the sun while I was away?"

"I kept him in the shade as much as I could. Do you think he can be sick?"

"Not enough for us to worry about, Jack dear. Children are apt to fuss when everything don't go just right. After I undress him, we'll read the Book, and then you shall go to bed."

The fact that Louis was not in his usual good

spirits and temper worried Jack considerably, despite the little woman's cheery words, and when he went to his tiny room it was impossible for him to sleep immediately.

He had lain awake fully two hours, at times speculating as to how he and the baby would finally get to New York, and again wondering if it could be possible that both Captain and Mrs. Littlefield were dead, when the stairway door was opened, as Aunt Nancy whispered cautiously,—

“Jack! Jack dear! Are you awake?”

The boy was on his feet in an instant.

“What’s the matter? Is Louis worse?”

“He seems to be quite sick. Will you dress and come down?”

Jack answered this summons very quickly as he tried to keep back the dry sob which came into his throat, for it seemed as if the greatest misfortune which could befall him would be to lose the baby at the time when he was in such a good home.

He found Aunt Nancy in the kitchen with Louis in her arms.

A fire had been built in the stove, and the little woman was seated in front of it rocking the baby as she stirred the boiling contents of a tin kettle.

"Do you know what catnip is when you see it growing?" she asked as Jack entered the room.

"I don't; but if you'll tell me where to go, I'll hunt for it."

"Light the lantern, so there won't be any mistake, and run out to the lane. You'll find some growing along the fence. Get as much as will fill this kettle, and come back as soon as you can."

"Is he very bad?" Jack asked in a trembling voice as he gazed at the baby's flushed cheeks.

"I never have had much experience with children, but I guess a little catnip tea will bring him around all right by morning."

"Hadn't we better have a doctor?"

"There is no need yet, and, besides, there isn't one within six miles."

"It don't make any difference how far it is, I'm willin' to walk any distance for him."

"We will first see what the morning brings forth."

Jack delayed no longer.

The lantern was lighted, and he started at once in search of an herb he did not even know by sight.

Ten minutes later he returned with an armful of green leaves, and Aunt Nancy bestowed but one hasty glance upon them when she cried,—

"O Jack, Jack, you've spent your time gathering burdocks! If you can hold the baby, I'll go after it myself."

"I'd rather try ag'in than have you go out where the grass is wet with dew."

"It won't hurt me. Take Louis"; and the little woman put the baby in Jack's arms as she hurried away, lantern in hand.

It seemed to Jack as if she had but left the house before she returned with the desired herb, and the boy said in surprise,—

"Is that what you call catnip? I saw plenty of it, but didn't think the leaves were big enough to do any good."

"In this world it isn't the big things which are capable of working the most benefit, Jack."

"If I hadn't known that before, I should after seeing you, Aunt Nancy. You're small, but there couldn't be anybody gooder."

Although the little woman said nothing, it could readily be seen that the compliment pleased her.

She bustled around much like a busy sparrow, putting the herbs in the kettle, making sundry mysterious decoctions, and otherwise preparing such things as she thought might be of benefit to the baby.

Jack held Louis meanwhile, and before Aunt Nancy was ready to take him again he asked in a low tone,—

“Do you think there is any chance he would die?”

“I don’t believe he is in any danger now, Jack dear; but all of us should think of death as something which will come sooner or later.”

The boy was silent for a moment, and then he asked abruptly,—

“You pray for everything you want, why don’t you do it now so he’ll be sure to live?”

“It wouldn’t be right to ask God simply for the child’s life.”

“Why not?”

“Because He doeth all things well, and we do not know what His purpose may be.”

“But there can’t be any good come of takin’ Louis away from me, when he’s all I’ve got.”

“That is something you don’t know, Jack dear. What God does is right, and we must bow to His will.”

Aunt Nancy spoke in such a solemn tone, or, as Jack afterward expressed it, “like as if she was in meetin’,” that the boy could say no more, but watched intently every move the little woman made until she was ready to take the baby in her arms once more.

This night was a long one to both, for neither thought of going to sleep.

Once Aunt Nancy insisted Jack should lie down; but he pleaded so hard to be allowed to remain awake, that she said no more, and the two sat with Louis until daybreak.

During this long time neither spoke until the baby had fallen asleep, and Jack was on the point of going out to milk the cow, when the little woman said in a tone very like that of fear,—

“Wouldn’t it be a dreadful thing if I should be punished for telling a lie to Mr. Pratt, by losing Louis just now when we are living so comfortably?”

“But you didn’t tell a lie,” Jack replied just a trifle impatiently.

“Both you and I know I did, however much we may try to persuade ourselves that it isn’t so, and I am certain some punishment will follow.”

Jack shook his head incredulously.

He began to understand that it would be useless to attempt to convince Aunt Nancy she had not committed a grievous sin, and was disposed to lose faith in a religion which would condemn so good a woman for having saved himself and the baby from much trouble.

To avoid paining her by saying what was in

his mind, he went out to milk, and on returning found the baby sleeping naturally.

"He seems much relieved," Aunt Nancy said as she put him to bed. "He will probably sleep a long while, and you had better get some rest."

Jack insisted that he did not need any, and continued doing such chores as he could find around the house until breakfast was ready, after which he proposed going to the post-office.

"Now the letter is written it had better be mailed, an' perhaps there are some things you want from the store."

"I do need a few notions; but it seems too bad to have you walk so far this hot morning."

"It'll do me good. I can be back by noon, and the weather won't be very warm while I'm goin' over."

Aunt Nancy allowed herself to be persuaded, because there really were some groceries she wanted, and after making out a list with infinite care, cautioning him not to pay more than five cents a pound for the coarse sugar and eighty cents for the tea, she gave him a lunch to be eaten during the return journey.

"I don't want you to stay any longer than is necessary; but at the same time you mustn't hurry

too fast," she said, as he walked rapidly down the lane; and Jack replied,—

"I'll be back by noon, unless something terrible happens."

Although the hunchback could not move as fast as more favored boys, he "kept at it," to use his favorite expression, and by this means was able to get over the ground with reasonable rapidity.

He was travelling steadily on, thinking of the baby and Aunt Nancy's apparently needless sorrow at having acted a lie during Mr. Pratt's call, when he was aroused to a sense of what was passing around him by hearing the disagreeably familiar voice of Bill Dean, as he shouted,—

"Hold on there a minute, I want to see you."

Bill was coming across the fields at full speed, and, knowing he could not escape if the bully should pursue him, Jack halted.

"So you're tryin' to hide behind Aunt Nancy's apron strings, eh?" Master Dean cried as he reached the road.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, yes, you do. Didn't you send her over to tell my father that I was goin' to drive you out of town, an' didn't she let on about the lickin' we give you?"

"That was her business. I tried to stop her, for I can 'tend to my own battles."

"Perhaps you can; we'll see about that later. Say, what of that man who was over here huntin' for you?"

Jack's cheeks grew pale.

He understood to whom Bill referred, and it seemed positive the whole story would be known, despite the sacrifice made by Aunt Nancy.

"Haven't got anything to say, eh? Well, I'm goin' to see him, an' tell where you are, then we'll see how you like tattlers."

Jack was frightened beyond the power of speech.

He had no idea but that his enemy knew exactly where to find Mr. Pratt, and firmly believed the time was near at hand when he and Louis would be forcibly taken away from Aunt Nancy's kindly care.

"That don't seem to strike you very well!" Bill cried with a laugh of triumph. "We'll have this thing fixed up in short order, an' then I reckon old Nancy will be ready to hire boys who know their business."

"What makes you jump down on me?" Jack asked piteously.

"You know mighty well. We told you what

to do, an' you thought we didn't mean business. Now you'll soon find out."

Jack hadn't the heart to hold any further conversation with his tormentor.

His only thought was to hurry on that he might be alone where the matter could be calmly discussed in his own mind, and walked swiftly away, followed by Bill's jeering words.

Now indeed he had a cup running over with sorrow. If his enemies knew of Mr. Pratt, it would not be long before that gentleman learned of his whereabouts, and it surely seemed as if the time had finally come when he must start out on the long journey, leaving behind the dearest friend he had ever met since the day when his mother crossed the dark river.

"There's no help for it," he said resolutely, "an' I've got to look at this thing right. Bill will tell the farmer right away, an' the sooner we leave the farther we'll be off when they come to find us."

Thus the matter was settled in his mind that the flight should be resumed at the earliest moment it might be safe to take Louis out of doors.

CHAPTER XI.

GARDENING.

IT can readily be supposed Jack was not inclined to linger on the road after this interview with Bill Dean.

That the latter would inform Farmer Pratt of his whereabouts he had no doubt, and this was a method of driving him "out of town" for which he was not prepared.

Walking at full speed, running over the descending ground, and trying to keep on at a good pace when he ascended hills, the journey to Treat's store was accomplished in a remarkably short time.

He found many customers before him, however, and was obliged to wait until it should be his turn, although he felt quite certain every moment was precious.

It was the proprietor of the establishment, who also acted as postmaster, that waited upon him, and while weighing out the "notions" Aunt Nancy had sent for, the gentleman said, as if answering his own question, —

"So you've been hired by Aunt Nancy."

"I'm stayin' there a little while, sir."

"You are, eh? Where do you hail from?"

Jack hesitated an instant, and then replied with a forced laugh,—

"I s'pose I oughter say I belong to the farm, 'cause I haven't any other home."

"An orphan, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did your folks useter live?"

Jack was not aware that Mr. Treat had the name of being the most inveterate gossip in the neighborhood; but felt positive there was no good reason why he should satisfy his curiosity on this point, more particularly since, in view of Bill Dean's threats, he wished to keep as a secret everything concerning himself, therefore said with an assumption of carelessness,—

"Almost anywhere. You see I was brought up to be a sailor."

"Sho! Is that so? Well now I wouldn't think you'd make much of a fist shinnin' 'round on the riggin'."

"Even if I am crooked I might be as spry as other fellers."

"That's a fact; but you don't look it"; and then the worthy Mr. Treat turned his attention

to the list Aunt Nancy had written for Jack's guidance.

When the goods had been made ready the proprietor of the store would have questioned the messenger further, but the latter hurried away without replying to what he did not consider it was necessary strangers should know.

Jack arrived at the farm unusually early, and Aunt Nancy exclaimed as he came up the lane looking heated and breathless,—

“Well, I declare! It does beat all how you can get over the ground! Why, I've known it to take Daniel Chick's horse a good bit longer to go to the post-office and back.”

“I was in a hurry to talk with you, an' so come as quick as I could, for I'm afraid Louis an' I must go away, even after all that's been done.”

The little woman looked up quickly in mingled alarm and surprise.

“Why, what has happened, Jack dear?”

For reply the boy repeated that which Bill Dean had said, and added in conclusion,—

“You see Mr. Pratt will be over here the minute he hears the news, an' then everything is settled the wrong way.”

“Are you certain Bill Dean knows where he lives?”

"Of course he must, else he wouldn't have said what he did."

"I'm sorry to have to doubt his word; but I couldn't put the least dependence in a thing he says, and there are more than me in this town of the same opinion. Besides, he is too indolent to walk so far."

"Still there's a chance he might send some word."

"You are right, Jack; but at the same time I wouldn't borrow trouble. In case that man should come, you can find some way of keeping out of his clutches until I see the 'Squire."

"What good would that do?"

"I don't know; but it does seem as if we might prevent him from carrying you and the baby away when I'm not only willing but anxious to have you both stay with me. I don't believe there is any law to compel children who have a good home to go to a poor-house, and if there is the least bit more bother I'm going to have the matter settled once and for all in the 'Squire's court."

Aunt Nancy spoke in such a decided tone, and seemed so thoroughly convinced there was a legal remedy for the trouble, that Jack felt relieved at once,

"I could get out of his way, no matter how close he got to me; but there's the baby. It might be I was where I couldn't find Louis quick enough when the farmer came, an' then he'd soon drag him away."

"The baby will be with me, and I promise you there'll be no dragging when I'm around," the little woman said with considerable dignity. "Keep up your courage, and I'm sure we shall come out all right, except for that miserable action of mine yesterday. If I had told the truth then and defied him, things would seem a great deal smoother now."

"Then I'll hold on a while longer."

"Certainly, and in the future stay close around the house, so those terrible boys can't make mischief. Did you ever do any gardening, Jack?"

"Do you mean plantin' seeds an' makin' 'em grow?"

"I mean cultivating the ground. No one can force the seeds to grow but He who rules over all. I would dearly love to have a few string beans and some cabbages, but it's so expensive hiring the land ploughed that I haven't been able to afford it."

"I could dig up a good deal with a shovel."

"If you'll try it I will get the seeds, and perhaps we shall have the pleasure of harvesting our own crops."

Jack was so relieved in mind that he did not feel any fatigue because of the long walk, and insisted on beginning work in the garden at once.

Despite all Aunt Nancy could say against it, he labored industriously with the shovel during the next two hours, and at the end of that time as much ground had been prepared as the little woman thought necessary.

"It won't do to try too much at first," she said musingly, as, with Louis in her arms, she watched the deformed boy make ready the small plot between the woodshed and barn. "I'll see about the seeds to-morrow, and it does seem as if we might put in more than cabbages and beans now that we've got so much room. I didn't suppose you would care to dig up very much."

"It isn't such hard work but that I'd be willin' to make one twice this size; as it is, I reckon you can plant pretty nearly all you want."

Then Aunt Nancy, looking very grave as if the task was one of the greatest importance, measured the plot into rows, putting in little

bits of wood to mark where each kind of seed should be planted, and when it was finished she looked thoroughly happy.

"We shall have a famous garden, Jack dear, and it won't be necessary for me to spend so much money for vegetables when the summer boarders come. They always wonder why I don't raise my own green stuff."

The garden and the plans concerning it gave both so much pleasure that, for the time being at least, Farmer Pratt was almost forgotten.

The chores occupied Jack's time during the remainder of the day, and when he retired it was to fall asleep almost immediately because of fatigue.

Early next morning Aunt Nancy visited one of the neighbors to procure seeds, and when another night came every row was planted.

During the three succeeding days Jack remained near the house, never going farther away than the main road, where he spent his spare time watching for Farmer Pratt.

It surely seemed as if Bill Dean was ignorant of the gentleman's address, or, as Aunt Nancy had suggested, was too indolent to make the journey to Scarborough, for nothing was seen or heard of Tom's father, and Jack began to feel a certain sense of security.

Louis was as contented as a child well could be, and each day claimed more of the little woman's affections until she actually began to look forward with dismay to the coming of the summer boarders, because then she could not devote to him so much of her time.

Never once was the nightly search for burglars omitted; and when Jack asked why such a labor was necessary when it was positive no one could enter the house during the day without her knowledge, she replied with an ominous shake of the head,—

“We can't say, Jack dear, what might happen. I have done this same thing for the last fifteen years, and don't intend to be careless now in my old age.”

“But you never found anybody, did you?”

“No, and I hope I never shall; but it would be impossible to sleep if I neglected what seems like a solemn duty.”

On the fourth day after the garden was planted both Jack and Aunt Nancy visited it twice to see if the seeds had sprouted, and several times did the sight of a weed cause them the greatest joy for a few moments, since it seemed certain something in the vegetable line had shown itself.

Like Farmer Pratt, Bill Dean remained out of sight, and the little woman was confident she had frightened him away.

"We can count on being left alone this summer, Jack dear, for he won't show his head around here. In all the years I have lived on the farm, when I went to his father was the first time I ever made a complaint to a neighbor, and I hope it will be the last, for I do think people should avoid troubling others with such things. We are told that we must forgive our brother seventy times seven; but there was no use in doing that by William, since it made no difference to him whether he was forgiven or not."

Jack was not so confident that those who threatened to drive him away had relinquished their purpose; but he said nothing regarding his fears, since no good could come of alarming the little woman. The day on which the first cabbage showed two tiny leaves above the surface was a red-letter day for the amateur gardeners.

Aunt Nancy spent at least two hours admiring it, and the seat under the big oak was abandoned at sunset in order that she might search for further proofs of their success.

"There is so much pleasure in having a garden that I shall never again be without one, that is," she added with a sigh, "if I have you with me. I can't bear to think that the time may come when we must part."

"May come? Why, it must come, Aunt Nancy. Just as soon as the weather gets cool, we are bound to start."

"I have been thinking perhaps Louis hasn't any relatives living, and in that case what would prevent you and he from staying here until I go down into the valley of the shadow of death?"

"Nothing would suit me better," Jack replied emphatically. "This is the first home I have ever known, and it will be hard to leave it."

"If you do go, Jack dear, it will be a lonely old woman you leave behind. I had gotten accustomed to living alone; but now it is different, and the house would seem deserted without you and the baby. Yet I am afraid something of the kind must happen to punish me for telling Mr. Pratt a lie. It is through a crime that I was enabled to enjoy your company, and we know what are the wages of sin."

Jack was not disposed to allow the conversation to continue in this channel.

He could not bring himself to believe the little woman had done anything wrong in letting Farmer Pratt think he and Louis were not there, and it made him impatient to hear her blame herself so severely.

"You see, Aunt Nancy, we would have to leave whether you done as you did or not, for how can we tell whether Capt. Littlefield or his wife are alive unless we go to find out?"

"Oh, Abner will attend to all that! He lived in York State so long that he knows nearly every one in it by this time, and when we hear from him the whole story must be known, for interesting himself in other people's affairs is what exactly suits Abner."

Jack could not be satisfied with this reply.

He believed implicitly everything Aunt Nancy told him, and she was so positive that there appeared to be no chance for doubt.

The little woman was called from the contemplation of the garden by that which, for a moment, caused Jack the greatest alarm.

The rattle of wheels was heard from the road, and an instant later Aunt Nancy said in surprise,—

"Mercy on us! who can that be driving up the lane?"

"It is the farmer comin' for us!" Jack cried excitedly as he caught Louis from Aunt Nancy's arms, and would have run off at full speed if she had not restrained him.

"Wait a moment, my child. I don't see any man in the wagon."

Jack looked quickly in the direction of the newcomers and then said,—

"There are two women, but one of them may be Mrs. Pratt."

Again he would have sought refuge in flight but for Aunt Nancy's detaining hand.

"It is only Mrs. Hayes and Mrs. Souders. I suppose they have come to make a call, and what *will* they think at seeing the house in such confusion?"

Jack, now that his fears were allayed, could not repress a smile at the idea of Aunt Nancy's house ever being in anything save a cleanly and orderly condition; but the little woman appeared really distressed because she had not had an opportunity to inspect it thoroughly before receiving company.

"Take care of Louis, and stay under the oak-tree until I come out again," she said, hurrying away to receive the newcomers.

Jack loitered near the barn where he would not be seen until the visitors had alighted, tied securely

the aged horse, whose only ambition appeared to be to remain motionless, and entered the house.

Then, instead of doing as Aunt Nancy had suggested, he took Louis into the woodshed, amusing him there for nearly an hour, when the two ladies departed.

"Where are you, Jack?" the little woman called softly when the horse had drawn the wagon and its occupants on to the highway.

"What is the matter?" Jack cried, as on emerging from his place of retreat he saw a look of deepest anxiety on Aunt Nancy's face. "Did they come here to take us away?"

"It's not quite as bad as that," the little woman replied with a long-drawn sigh, "but very nearly. What *do* you suppose they wanted?"

Jack didn't even attempt to hazard a guess, and Aunt Nancy continued in a mournful tone,—

"They want to hold the monthly sewing circle here day after to-morrow!"

"Well?" Jack asked, surprised that such a request should have caused so much distress.

"Well? Why, Jack, how can you treat it so lightly? Just think of it! Only one day to clean house, go to the store, and do all the cooking!"

"I don't see that there'll be very much to do in the way of cleaning house. It shines like a new

three-cent piece already, and how are you goin' to make it look any better?"

"O Jack! boys don't understand about such things. You can't see in the corners where the dirt always lodges, and the company will be sure to find everything that is slighted."

"Well, I can go to the store for you at least."

"I wouldn't allow you to take the chances of seeing William Dean even if you could do the errands, which is impossible. I must get Mr. Chick to carry me over in his team, and while I am away you and Louis are to stay in the house with the doors locked."

"I don't think there is any need of that. Those fellers wouldn't dare to come here."

"I can't believe they would; but at the same time it will do no harm to be careful. Now what shall we have for supper?"

"Do you mean to-night?"

"Of course not. It doesn't make any difference what we eat for a day or two; but we must think very seriously of what is to be cooked for the circle."

"Have some of your nice biscuits and a piece of cake. If folks can get anything better than that, they deserve to go hungry."

"O Jack! you don't understand such things.

I should be mortified almost to death if I didn't do as well as Mrs. Souders did when the circle met at her house last month."

Then Aunt Nancy, looking as if a heavy burden of care had suddenly fallen upon her, went in to the kitchen, taking Louis with her, that Jack might be free to milk the cow.

CHAPTER XII.

LOUIS'S ADVENTURE.

ON this evening, immediately after supper had been eaten and the dishes washed, Aunt Nancy announced that it would be necessary for her to call upon Mr. Daniel Chick.

"If I wait until morning his team may not be at home, and, besides, I want him to be ready to make an early start. We must be back by noon at the latest."

"Why not let me go and tell him what you want?" Jack asked.

"Because you don't know where he lives, and then again it is necessary to pass Mr. Dean's in order to reach his house. William might be at home, and who knows what would happen?"

Then Aunt Nancy made a hurried toilet, clothing herself in one of those quaint costumes which Jack did not think at all becoming, and said, as she entered the kitchen again,—

"You must promise not to step your foot out of doors while I am gone. Keep everything well

locked, and if any one should happen to call don't show yourself without first learning who they are."

Jack agreed, and while the little woman was absent he rocked Louis to sleep, swept the floor until one would have said a broom ought to be ashamed for going over such a cleanly surface with any idea of collecting dirt, and was in the "fore-room" with a lighted candle admiring the crockery rooster when Aunt Nancy returned.

"It's me, Jack dear!" she cried as she knocked softly on the door, and when it was opened, entered with the air of one who has been successful.

"I got there just in time. He was going over to Henry Mitchell's to tell him he'd haul gravel to-morrow; but of course he had rather go to Treat's, for the work isn't so hard on either himself or his horse. Now we must get to bed early, for I told him I wanted to start by sunrise at the very latest."

"But, Aunt Nancy, you don't mean that I am to stay in the house with the doors locked all the forenoon, do you? There are lots of things I could do; but it would be pretty warm if there wasn't any chance for air."

"I suppose you might have the doors open, provided you kept a sharp watch on the road, and

closed them again in case that Dean boy or his associates should come," the little woman replied thoughtfully.

"What shall I do?"

"You could clean the knives and forks, and wash all the best dishes through two waters. Be careful when you wipe them, Jack dear, for it would be terrible if any should be broken."

After these arrangements had been made, Aunt Nancy remained silent a short time to free her mind from worldly thoughts, and then came the evening devotions, when the little woman prayed earnestly for the "weary and heavy laden," which Jack thought was a reference to herself and the expected company.

It was yet dark next morning when a noise from the kitchen aroused the hunchback, and hurrying down he found Aunt Nancy busily engaged preparing breakfast.

"Why, you must have stayed awake all night!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"Indeed I wasn't so foolish as to do anything of the kind; but when I have work on hand I like to be about it, and goodness knows there's plenty for me to do between now and to-morrow night."

"Did you wake Louis?"

"No; let him sleep as long as he chooses. You can dress and give him some bread and milk?"

"That part of it will be all right," Jack replied confidently, and then he prepared to astonish old crumple-horn by appearing before her while it was yet so dark that she could hardly see the lunch of clover to which she was accustomed during milking time.

Breakfast had been cooked, eaten, and the dishes washed before Mr. Daniel Chick and his venerable horse came up the lane.

Aunt Nancy was not only ready for the journey, but had begun to grow impatient because of the delay, when he reined up in front of the broad stone step as he said in a cheery tone, calculated to soothe any angry feelings,—

"Well, I must say you're a master hand at gettin' up, Aunt Nancy. 'Pears like as if you was allers on foot like a sparrer."

"I try to do what I have on hand in good season," was the rather sharp reply. "There would be less poor folks in this world if people didn't dally round in such a shiftless manner."

Mr. Chick knew full well that this remark was aimed especially at him; but like a wise man he made no reply lest worse should follow, and turned the wheels of the wagon that the little

woman might have no trouble in clambering on board.

Aunt Nancy stopped only long enough to give some parting advice to Jack.

"Be sure to keep a sharp watch on the road if you have the doors open," she whispered, "and don't go out, even into the yard, unless it is absolutely necessary, for nobody knows what may happen. When you wash the best dishes be careful, Jack dear, for I should feel very badly in case any were broken."

"I'll attend to it in great shape, Aunt Nancy."

"Don't give Louis too much milk at a time, the weather is so hot that it might curdle on his stomach; and if I don't succeed in getting home until afternoon, there is some cold meat and cake on the hanging shelf in the cellar. Don't go without a lunch; it is very unhealthy to work while you are hungry."

"Who's dallying now, Aunt Nancy?" Mr. Chick cried as he tried to prevent his horse from nibbling at the honeysuckle-bush.

"If you had come as you agreed I should have had plenty of time to attend to matters," was the sharp reply; and then with many injunctions for him to keep a firm hold on the reins, the little woman succeeded in gaining the rather shaky seat.

“Take good care of Louis!” she cried as the horse ambled slowly down the lane; and Jack re-entered the house feeling decidedly lonely at the prospect of being without Aunt Nancy for several hours.

In order to occupy his mind he set about the work laid out, and was so industrious that before the baby made known the fact of being awake, the knives and forks had been cleaned.

Fully an hour was spent dressing and feeding Louis, after which he was allowed to play on the kitchen floor while his crooked guardian washed the “best dishes.”

This was a task which required considerable time, and at eleven o’clock it was hardly more than half finished.

Then again Louis wanted milk, and when it had been given him he insisted upon being allowed to go out on the doorstep.

At first Jack was disposed to keep him in the house; but when he became fretful, gave him his own way, as he said half to himself,—

“I don’t s’pose there can be any harm in lettin’ you stay here; but if anything *should* happen, Aunt Nancy would think I had been careless.”

After that he kept a strict watch over the baby, going to the door every few moments, and on each

occasion finding Louis playing contentedly with a string of buttons the little woman had prepared for him.

The fact that he showed no disposition to leave the broad stone caused Jack to have less care than usual, and this, coupled with the idea of cleaning the most elaborate dishes, rendered him oblivious to the flight of time.

He was brought to a realization of what was passing around by hearing the rumble of a carriage in the lane, and almost before he could reach the door, Aunt Nancy was in the house, while Mr. Chick had driven away at the full speed of his very slow horse.

"Did you get along all right, Jack dear?" the little woman asked, as she deposited an armful of bundles on the table.

"Yes, indeed. You see there has been plenty of work, and it doesn't seem any time since you left."

"Where is the baby?"

"On the doorstep. He fussed to go out, an' I thought the fresh air wouldn't do him any harm."

"Which doorstep?"

"Why here, of course"; and Jack stepped forward only to give vent to a cry of alarm an

instant later. "He isn't here at all! Where do you suppose he could have gone?"

Aunt Nancy was at the door before he ceased speaking, and gazed up and down the yard in bewilderment, but without seeing any signs of the missing baby.

For an instant the two stood gazing at each other in perplexity, and then Aunt Nancy asked sharply,—

"How long since you saw him?"

"It didn't seem many minutes before you came; but I s'pose it must have been, else he'd be 'round here now."

"Run up to the barn and see if he is there!"

As she spoke the little woman went down the lane, returning just as Jack came back.

"He isn't there," the latter said.

"Nor on the road. Of course he must be somewhere near, for children can't disappear entirely in such a mysterious fashion. Go up the lane and I'll look back of the barn."

"But then we shall be leaving the barn alone
You stay here an' I'll do the searchin'."

"It wouldn't make any difference if we left the house wide open for a month, I couldn't stand still while that dear little baby is wandering around nobody knows where."

Jack understood that it would be useless to remonstrate, and started off at full speed.

Up to the entire length of the lane he ran without finding that for which he sought, and then back to the house where he was met by Aunt Nancy on whose wrinkled face was written fear and anguish.

She did not wait for him to tell her that the search had been in vain, but cried,—

“Go up through the field from the shed. There is a place where he might have gotten through the fence, and it would lead directly to the duck pond if he kept on in a straight line!”

There was a tone in her voice which told of the fear she had regarding the possible ending of his adventures; and Jack, with a mental prayer that he would find the little fellow before it was too late, ran across the enclosure, Aunt Nancy going in the same direction, but at a slight angle.

The little woman’s anxiety gave fleetness to her feet, and she travelled even faster than Jack could.

Both called loudly from time to time, but without receiving any answer, and Jack’s heart grew heavy as he thought of what might have happened while he was in the house all unconscious of impending trouble.

As the two neared the pond the figure of a boy

could be distinguished among the foliage of alders running at full speed toward the main road, and Jack shouted to Aunt Nancy,—

“There goes one of Bill Dean’s gang. They know where Louis is.”

This caused the little woman to redouble her cries, and a few seconds later two more boys could be dimly seen as they hurried away, keeping well within the shelter of the bushes to avoid recognition.

There was no longer any question in Jack’s mind but that he would soon find the baby, nor was he mistaken.

On arriving in view of the pond both saw a rudely constructed raft of fence rails at least ten yards from the shore, and on it, crowing and laughing as if he was having the jolliest possible time sat Louis.

“How can we reach him?” Aunt Nancy cried, as she stood wringing her hands, while the big tears ran down her cheeks. “He will surely be drowned, Jack! What is to be done?”

The hunchback had no thought of his own safety or discomfort as compared with that of rescuing the baby.

Without hesitation he ran into the pond, continuing on at risk of being mired, until the



water was above his waist, and the baby held out his hands to be taken.

“Sit still Louis, sit still an’ Jack will come to you!”

It was impossible to run very fast through the water; and to Aunt Nancy, who stood on the bank in helpless grief, it seemed as if the deformed lad hardly moved, so slow was his progress.

More than once did it appear as if the baby would attempt to leave the raft in order to meet his crooked guardian; but by dint of coaxing, Jack succeeded in persuading him to remain seated until he gained his side.

Then he lifted the child in his arms, staggering ashore to where the little woman stood waiting to receive him, and the rescue was accomplished.

Aunt Nancy alternately laughed and cried as she pressed Louis closely to her bosom, and Jack stood silently by, wondering whether he was to be scolded for having so grossly neglected his charge.

It was several moments before she paid any attention to the older boy, and then it was to exclaim,—

“Mercy on us, Jack! I had entirely forgotten you! Run home as soon as possible, or you will catch your death a cold!”

"A wettin' won't hurt me on a warm day like this. I'm used to such things."

"But you must change your clothes at once, and there's no other way but to put on one of my dresses again."

Jack gave no heed to this suggestion, or command, whichever it might be called. He was trying to understand how the baby could have come so far without assistance, when Aunt Nancy said suddenly,—

"It doesn't take one long to realize how the dear little fellow came here. Those wicked boys must have found him near the shed, and brought him to this place."

Several poles lying near by told how the raft was forced toward the centre of the pond, and the fact that three fellows had been seen running through the bushes was sufficient proof, at least to Aunt Nancy and Jack, that Bill Dean and his friends had done the mischief.

"I should forget everything I ought to remember if I had that Dean boy here this minute!" the little woman said angrily as she surveyed the evidences of the cruel work. "It is a burning shame that such as he should be allowed among decent people!"

"We don't know for certain that it was Bill Dean," Jack suggested.

"Yes, we do, for there is no other boy in this town who does such things. I shall see his father again, and when I do it will be very hard work to rule my spirit."

"It only makes them worse to complain."

"Then I will have him arrested!" And now Aunt Nancy spoke in such an angry tone that Jack did not venture to reply; but he knew from past experience that she would soon be sorry for having given way to her temper.

Again the little woman spoke of Jack's condition as if she had not noticed it before, and insisted on his coming home at once, although she could not have supposed he wished to go anywhere else.

Louis apparently had no idea he had been exposed to danger, but laughed and pulled at the tiny ringlets either side Aunt Nancy's face until her anger vanished, and she said in a tone of penitence,—

"Really, Jack dear, I get frightened sometimes when I realize how wicked I am growing. I can't seem to control my temper in anything which concerns the baby, and goodness knows how it is all going to end. I began by telling a lie, and now say terrible things on the slightest provocation, though goodness knows this would have stirred up

almost any one. You see I took the first step, which is the hardest, and now fall before the least temptation."

"You oughtent talk that way, Aunt Nancy. If everybody was as good as you are, this would be an awful nice place to live in."

The little woman shook her head as if reproaching him for his words of praise, but did not continue the subject, because by this time they had arrived at the house, and it was necessary she should get the garments Jack had worn once before.

Again the hunchback received a ducking under the pump, and then went out to the barn to make his toilet.

"Come back as soon as you can, for I want to show you what I bought, and between us we must decide what we shall have for supper to-morrow."

When Jack returned to the house, Aunt Nancy had her purchases arranged on the table that he might see them to the best advantage, and then came the discussion of what was a very important matter in the little woman's mind.

"I bought citron so as to make that kind of cake if you think it would be nicer than sponge, though I have always been very fortunate in making sponge cake, and that is a good deal more than most people can say."

“Why not have both kinds?”

“I declare I never thought of that. It is the very thing, and I’ll begin at once while you finish the dishes. This time we’ll see if between both of us we can’t keep Louis away from those wicked boys. I got a nice ham, for that is always good cold, and I engaged two chickens from Daniel Chick. Had we better have them roasted or boiled?”

“I thought this was to be only a supper.”

“That’s what it is; but it would never do to have but one kind of cold meat. Why, if you’ll believe me, Mrs. Souders had chicken, ham, and tongue, to say nothing of soused pig’s feet.”

“Your supper’ll be better’n hers if you make plenty of hot biscuit.”

“I shall surely do that, and have loaf bread besides. I wonder if you couldn’t wait on the table?”

“Of course I can. That was what I did on board the ‘Atlanta.’”

“Then we shall get along famously. Now help me clear off one end of this table, and I’ll begin work.”

The little woman at once set about the task of preparing food for the members of the sewing circle, and nothing was done without first asking Jack’s advice.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SEWING CIRCLE.

So deeply engrossed was Aunt Nancy in the work of making ready for the supper, that the indignities offered Louis by Bill Dean and his partners passed almost unheeded for the time being.

It is true that now and then she would speak of what had been done, announcing her intention of complaining again to Bill's father; but the words would hardly be spoken before something in the culinary line demanded her attention, and the subject would be dropped until a more convenient season.

Jack labored most industriously, beating eggs, sifting flour, washing pans, and keeping the fire roaring, thus doing his full share in the important preparations.

Louis was forced to remain in the kitchen, despite his great desire to get out of doors; and both Jack and the little woman kept strict watch over him, but happily ignorant of the fact that

hidden within the friendly shelter of the alder-bushes were Bill Dean and his chums watching another opportunity to get hold of the baby as before.

"The sewin' circle is goin' over to old Nancy's termorer," Bill said in a whisper, "an' we won't be smart if we don't get a chance to square off with Hunchie."

"What do you count on doin'?" Sam Phinney asked.

"That's jest what we've got to fix up. The old woman will have her hands full of company, an' it seems as if we might rig somethin' that'll pay. Hunchie won't show himself outside the place, for he knows we're layin' for him, an' our only show is to sneak in while the supper is goin' on."

"We can easy get in the shed an' wait for something to turn up," Jip Lewis suggested; and the others thought this a very good idea.

"I'll cook up somethin' between now an' then," Bill said confidently. "There ain't much chance they'll let that youngster out ag'in, so come, go over on the hill an' see what the fellers there are doin'."

This had the effect of causing the party to adjourn without anything having been accomplished save an agreement between the three that, during the

meeting of the sewing circle something should be done toward settling matters with the boy who insisted upon remaining in town after they had warned him to leave.

During the remainder of the day Aunt Nancy and Jack worked without ceasing in the kitchen, and when night came the arrangements for the company were so nearly completed that the little woman said with a sigh of relief when she and her crooked assistant were resting under the old oak,—

“I declare, Jack dear, it is surprising how much we have done since noon! I never could have gotten through without you, and don’t understand what I did before you came.”

“I wish I could do more. It doesn’t seem as if I worked half hard enough to pay for what you’ve done to help Louis an’ me.”

“Bless you, child, I’d be paid a dozen times over if I had nothing more than your company; and as for work, why, you’ve done twice as much as Daniel Chick’s daughter would in the same time, and I should have paid her fifty cents, at least, if you hadn’t been here.”

“It doesn’t seem very much anyhow; but if you’re satisfied, why that settles it, of course. I wonder if Bill Dean’s crowd will try to get hold of Louis again?”

"Not after I've seen his father, and that's just what I intend to do when the circle meetin' is over. We had better get old crumple-horn in the yard now so we can go to bed early, for I count on being at work by sunrise to-morrow."

The chores were quickly done, the house searched once more for possible intruders, the evening devotions concluded, and Jack went to his tiny room happy in the thought that he had been of considerable assistance to Aunt Nancy.

The finishing touches were completed by noon on the following day, and the little woman was arrayed in all her antiquated finery to receive the expected guests.

Jack had only the suit of clothes he had worn at the time of leaving the "Atlanta," consequently very little could be done on his part toward "dressing up"; but his face shone from repeated applications of soap and water, his hair was combed until every portion of it looked as if it had been fastened in place, and his shoes had a very high polish.

Louis's white frock had been washed and ironed, therefore he was, as Aunt Nancy expressed it, "in apple-pie order, and as pretty a baby as ever came into Maine."

"I suppose we shall have to put some of the

horses in the stable, Jack dear, for a good many of the people will ride, and the question is whether you could unharness them?" Aunt Nancy said as she sat in the "fore-room" awaiting the coming of the guests.

"I never did such a thing; but it can't be hard if a feller watches how the harness comes off."

"You are smart enough to do almost anything. I'm certain there won't be trouble," Aunt Nancy said in a tone of conviction, and then the rumble of wheels on the lane told that the first of the "company" was coming.

The newcomer was Mrs. Souders, who drove a horse Jack felt confident he could unharness; and as she alighted he stood by the head of the venerable animal as he had seen regular grooms do in the city.

From that time until nearly three o'clock the hunchback was kept very busy attending to the stable work.

Not less than ten horses were driven into the yard, and he was expected to put them in a barn where were but two stalls, including the one it would be necessary to reserve for old crumple-horn.

It was some time before he could solve the problem, but it was finally done by hitching

several to the fence outside, and standing the remainder on the thrashing-floor.

The matter of harness and carriages troubled him considerably; but he believed the owners of the same would be able to recognize their property, therefore no attempt was made to keep them in regular order.

When the visitors ceased to arrive, and Aunt Nancy told him she did not think any more were coming, he went to the pump for a thorough wash, and while thus engaged heard a certain portion of the conversation which came from the "fore-room" where the members of the circle were supposed to be working very hard to relieve the poor and distressed by supplying them with garments, each fashioned according to the fancy of its maker.

Not for a moment would Jack have thought of deliberately playing the part of eavesdropper; but hearing reference made to Louis and himself, it was only natural he should linger longer than was absolutely necessary.

Mrs. Souders was speaking when he first came near the house, and he heard her say quite sharply,—

"Why, Nancy Curtis, are you thinkin' of adoptin' a couple of children at your time of life,

an' one of 'em a worthless cripple that'll always be a bill of expense? It seems as if you'd lived long enough in the world to be more sensible."

"I'd like to know, Sarah Souders, why you think Jack is 'worthless'?" the little woman asked in a tone of indignation.

"Because he can't be anything else. A hunchback isn't any better than a reg'lar invalid, an' besides I've always heard it said they are terribly conceited."

"Then this one is an exception. I never had a girl on the farm that helped me as much as he does, and as for the baby — "

"That's it exactly," Mrs. Souders interrupted. "It seems that the cripple isn't enough, but you are determined to make your cross heavier by taking care of a baby, when it would be better to think of restin' your old bones."

"If it is a pleasure to me, it would seem as if nothing should be said against it," Aunt Nancy replied mildly. "I only wish it might be possible for me to keep the little fellow as long as I live."

Then Jack heard that which told him Aunt Nancy was kissing the baby, and he said to himself,—

"If these people think Aunt Nancy has no

business to keep me here, I s'pose they are right, an' I oughter go away."

"Of course you've the privilege of doing as you please, Nancy Curtis," Mrs. Souders continued, "but I must maintain that it is wrong for you to be obliged to support two helpless children when it is hard work to make both ends meet. I am only sayin' this for your own good, Nancy, an' both Mrs. Hayes an' myself decided it was the duty of some one to talk with you about it."

The little woman made no reply to this, and Jack was forced to leave the pump, since his toilet had been completed.

"They've made her believe it," he said to himself as the tears would persist in coming into his eyes, "an' it's my place to tell her I'll go. Then she won't have any more trouble with Bill Dean's crowd."

He firmly believed it was necessary he and Louis should leave the farm, and the knowledge that Aunt Nancy depended upon him during this day, at least, was a positive pleasure.

It had been agreed he should wait upon the table.

Such dishes as could not well remain on the overladen board were to be left in the small summer kitchen, and the little woman had arranged

a system of signals by which he could understand what she wanted.

Although it was yet too soon for supper, he went to his post of duty in order to be ready at the earliest moment Aunt Nancy should require his services, and there stayed, thinking mournfully of what he had heard.

In the mean while the stable was unguarded, for Jack had no idea danger was to be apprehended from that quarter, and at about the same time he entered the kitchen, Bill Dean said to his companions who had followed him into the shed,—

“I did have a plan for some fun, fellers; but now there’s a bigger show than we ever struck. I don’t reckon Hunchie knows very much about harnessin’ horses, an’ even if he does we’ll set him wild.”

“How?” Sam asked in a whisper.

“It ain’t likely anybody will go out to the barn till after supper, is it?”

“Of course not.”

“Then all we’ve got to do is to sneak around back of the stable. I know how to get in from there, an’ we’ll mix them harnesses up in sich shape that even Mike Crane himself couldn’t put ‘em together in less’n one day.”

"You're a brick, Bill, at fixin' things. Let's hurry, for it'll take quite awhile."

With decidedly more care than was necessary, the conspirators crept out of the shed, and, going around by the rear of the buildings, entered the barn where Jack had left the harness.

There was not one in the party who would not have grumbled loud and long had he been obliged to work as rapidly and hard as was necessary in order to effect their purpose; but since it was mischief instead of useful labor, neither so much as dreamed of complaining.

The harness belonging to the teams driven by Mrs. Souders and Mrs. Hayes received the greater portion of their attention.

On them nearly every strap was shortened or lengthened, and other parts interchanged, until one not thoroughly familiar with both could hardly have recognized the original set.

Each in turn was overhauled, and when the mischief-makers left the barn there was no question but that Jack would have great difficulty in untangling the snarl, even if he should ever be able to do so.

"I reckon that will make all hands mad, an' Hunchie's the one who is bound to get the blame," Bill said with a chuckle of satisfaction as they

stood for an instant at the rear of the barn.
“Now where’ll we stay to watch the fun?”

“Out by the cow-yard. The grass is so tall nobody’ll ever see us.”

This appeared to be a good idea, and the three adopted it at once, although all believed it must be several hours before Jack would be called upon to harness the horses.

In the kitchen the deformed boy, with a heart so heavy it seemed as if he could never smile again, waited patiently until a bustle from the “fore-room” told that the guests were making preparations to discuss Aunt Nancy’s supper.

“They are getting ready to come,” the little woman said excitedly, as she entered the kitchen hurriedly. “Help me fill these plates with biscuit, and then cover the rest over and leave them in the oven till they are needed. I was afraid I should have bad luck with my bread; but it seems to be all right.”

“Them biscuit couldn’t be better if the Queen of England had made ’em,” Jack replied emphatically.

“I’m sure I don’t know what kind of a bread-maker she may be; but I wouldn’t like to have it said that even a queen could do better than I, taking it the whole year through, an’ allowing for the trouble that yeast will sometimes cause.”

Aunt Nancy was ready to go into the main kitchen, which on this occasion had been converted into a dining-room, and Jack followed close behind with his hands full of plates.

It so chanced that the guests had not waited to be summoned, but came from the "fore-room" under the pretence of assisting the little woman, and Jack, who was walking quite rapidly, intent only on carrying the dishes without accident, ran directly into Mrs. Souders.

That lady had never been celebrated for curbing her temper, and to-day she appeared to be in a very ill-humor, probably because of something which may have been said by her friends in the "fore-room."

Therefore, instead of treating the matter as an accident, and acknowledging she had no business to be standing in the way of those who were working, she wheeled suddenly and gave the cripple a resounding blow on the ear, which sent him headlong, scattering plates and biscuit in every direction.

"You little beggar!" she screamed, as her face grew crimson with rage. "I didn't come here to have any of your low tricks played on me. If Nancy Curtis hasn't got spirit enough to give you a lesson, I'll do it myself."

She stepped quickly toward poor Jack, who stood silent and motionless surveying the wreck of Aunt Nancy's best crockery, never for a moment thinking the guest had any idea of inflicting further punishment, and seized him by the coat collar.

Jack involuntarily threw up his arm to ward off the blow; but the heavy hand descended twice in rapid succession, and then it was grasped from behind as the little woman's voice, trembling with suppressed rage, was heard,—

“Sarah Souders, aren't you ashamed to strike a cripple?”

“Indeed I'm not when it is one like this, whose place is at the poor farm rather than in decent people's houses”; and the lady would have repeated the blow but for the fact that Aunt Nancy clung to her with nervous desperation.

“Don't you *dare* strike that child again, Sarah Souders!” she cried. “I am trying hard to rule my spirit, but the struggle may be too much for my strength, and then I shall say that which would make me sorry afterward.”

“You should be sorry now when you reject the advice of your best friends,” Mrs. Souders replied; but she released her hold of Jack's collar, and he

began gathering up the fragments of crockery and bread.

“If you mean that I ought to throw these children, who have made my life happier than it has been for many years, out on to a world of such hard-hearted people as you, then it is time you tried to understand the meaning of the word ‘charity,’” the little woman said with a slight tremor of the voice as she stepped back a few paces from her angry guest. “The fault was yours, so far as his running into you was concerned. He was doing his work, and you were in his way.”

“I didn’t suppose your foolishness had gone so far that you would uphold the crooked little beggar when he deliberately insults one who has been your best friend.”

“He had no intention of insulting you, and I do not want him called a beggar, for he isn’t. Even though he was, I have yet to learn that poverty is a crime.”

“I see plainly this is no place for me. The most you can do now is to turn me out of doors.”

“I do not wish to do anything of the kind, but feel called upon to advise that you think the matter over before speaking again.”

“That is sufficient, Nancy Curtis, quite suf-

ficient. Jane Hayes, will you go with me, or do you prefer to remain?"

"I shall stay here," Mrs. Hayes replied; and with a fling of her skirts, which was probably intended to express both indignation and injury received, Mrs. Souders sailed out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER THE STORM.

JACK, who had gathered up the fragments and swept the crumbs from the floor, now looked about him in alarm.

The sense of having been wrongly treated was overpowered by the thought that he was the cause, however innocent, of plunging Aunt Nancy into new troubles.

It seemed just then as if he was pursued by some unkind fate which brought to him and those who befriended him all manner of misfortune.

During fully a minute after Mrs. Souders drifted so majestically from the room, not a word was spoken.

Aunt Nancy stood leaning against the table, a vivid red spot glowing on either cheek, and holding her hand over her heart as if to repress its beatings.

The guests gathered around her, each trying at the same time to express her opinion of what

had occurred,—a proceeding which resulted only in a perfect Babel of confusion.

The little woman soon recovered her composure sufficiently to remember her duties as hostess, and said to Jack in a low tone,—

“Do you think you can harness Mrs. Souders’s horse? We mustn’t forget the courtesy we owe a guest, no matter what has happened.”

“I can do it if she will show me which wagon an’ harness is hers. You see there were so many teams comin’ all at once I couldn’t keep run of ‘em.”

“Go out and do the best you can. Very likely she will be at the stable by the time you get there.”

Jack hurried away feeling rather uncertain as to what the result would be when he was alone with the angry woman, but determined to remain silent whatever she might say.

On reaching the barn he had but little difficulty in deciding upon the carriage he believed belonged to Mrs. Souders, and was backing it into the yard when that lady arrived.

“Are you so stupid that you can’t tell one wagon from another?” she asked sharply.

“Isn’t this yours, ma’am?”

“No, it isn’t, and you know as well as I do.”

"I never saw it but once, an' that was when there were a good many here. If you'll pick it out, an' show me the harness, I'll soon have the horse hitched up."

"I suppose Nancy Curtis told you to get rid of me as soon as possible; what you did in the dining-room wasn't enough, eh?"

"Indeed she didn't; an', if you please, ma'am, I couldn't tell where you was goin' to step when I had my arms full of dishes."

"You needn't talk to me. If Nancy Curtis is fool enough to put you above your place, it's no reason why you should think others haven't good sense. That is my carriage, and the sooner it is ready the better I'll be pleased."

Jack wheeled out the vehicle she designated, and then asked,—

"Now will you tell me which is your harness an' horse?"

"You're a bigger fool than I took you to be," was the reply, as the lady rushed like a small-sized tornado into the barn, and, after some difficulty, succeeded in finding the animal, which was hitched with the others on the thrashing-floor. "Couldn't even find a stall for him! I don't know what's come over Nancy Curtis since you brats arrived at this place!"

Then she examined the pile of harness, expressing her opinion very forcibly because Jack had laid them on the floor instead of hanging each set on pegs; but to find her own was more than she could do.

"Take any one of them," she finally said in an angry tone, wiping the perspiration from her flushed face.

Jack obeyed without a word, but, thanks to the efforts of Bill Dean and his partners, neither he nor Mrs. Souders could gear the horse.

One set of harness was much too large, and another so small a goat could hardly have worn it, while all were strapped together in the oddest fashion.

This Mrs. Souders believed was owing to Jack's carelessness or ignorance while unharnessing the horses, and the more she struggled to fit one without regard to ownership the greater became her anger, until it was almost beyond bounds.

"My husband shall hear of this," she said wrathfully. "Put that horse right back, and he will come over to undo your wicked tricks. Don't speak to me, you little pauper," she cried as the cripple was about to reply; and dealing him a blow on the ear which sent him reeling against the animal, the lady walked rapidly out of the barn.

Jack rubbed the injured member an instant, looked about ruefully, wondering what could have happened to the harness, led the horse back to his place, and went out of the barn just in time to see Mrs. Souders sailing around the corner of the lane into the main road.

He walked slowly to the house, arriving there as the guests had seated themselves at the table, and Aunt Nancy, who looked as if she had been crying, asked,—

“Why didn’t Mrs. Souders go with her team?”

Jack told the story of the bewitched harness, adding in conclusion,—

“I took every piece off as carefully as I knew how, and laid them on the floor, because there wasn’t any pegs or nails to hang them on. Now it seems like as if nothing was right, an’ in the whole lot we couldn’t find a single thing which would fit.”

The guests looked at each other in surprise and alarm, probably thinking if Mrs. Souders didn’t succeed in getting her team with the entire collection to choose from, their chances of leaving Aunt Nancy’s save by walking were exceedingly slim.

A flood of questions were poured forth on the hapless Jack, who could only repeat his former statement.

The matter was now becoming so serious that Aunt Nancy's inviting meal no longer had sufficient charms to command their attention, and the entire party insisted on visiting the barn at once to ascertain for themselves the true condition of affairs.

With the baby in her arms, Aunt Nancy led the way.

Bill Dean and his friends, seeing the procession coming, were not at a loss to divine the meaning of this sudden exodus from the house.

"This is gettin' too hot for us," Bill said in a whisper. "With all them old women around we'll be found for certain, an' the quicker we skin out of here the safer we'll be."

His partners were of the same opinion, only a trifle more frightened, and their terror caused them to do a very foolish thing.

Instead of crawling under shelter of the grass until they were at a safe distance, Sam and Jip leaped to their feet, running at full speed toward the road.

As a matter of course Bill was bound to follow the example, thinking how pleased he would be to have his hands on Jip for a single moment in order to punish him for his cowardice, and thus the conspirators stood revealed.

"I think we can understand now what has happened to the harness," Mrs. Hayes said as she pointed towards the fugitives, "and I for one say it's time that Dean boy was made to believe it is dangerous to play such tricks."

The red spots came on Aunt Nancy's cheeks again as she gazed after the retreating figures, and from the nervous working of her fingers Jack understood she was using every effort to "rule her spirit."

As she stood silent and motionless, heeding not the fact that Louis was pulling her ringlets out of shape, some of the other ladies continued on to the barn, and a single glance at the mismated harness convinced them it was useless to attempt straightening matters.

"It is foolish to stand here while the biscuit are getting cold," Mrs. Hayes finally said. "Let us go and get supper, after which there will be plenty of time to think over what should be done."

The majority of the party shared this opinion, and Aunt Nancy was literally led back to her own home, while the guests divided their attention between the bountiful supper and a discussion as to how Bill Dean and his associates could best be suppressed.

None of the party had had more than three cups

of tea when Mr. Souders arrived looking very warm because of his long walk, and decidedly angry in consequence of the report made by his wife.

He first demanded an interview with Jack, who was sitting in the kitchen fully occupied with his mournful thoughts; but when the ladies began to explain matters relative to the mischief done, he could not but believe the hunchback was innocent of the charges brought against him by Mrs. Souders.

"I'll take Bill Dean in hand myself," he said with an ominous gesture. "There is plenty of time for that; but I reckon fixing things in the barn will last longer. Can you lend me the cripple for a while, Aunt Nancy?"

The little woman called Jack, explained that he was to assist the gentleman, and as the two went toward the barn she said feelingly, —

"It makes very little difference what people may say, although I would rather have the good will of a dog than his ill will; but if I can prevent it that boy shall not leave this farm unless relatives come forward to claim him."

Several united with Aunt Nancy in praising Jack, and since the others remained silent there was no opportunity for a disagreeable argument.

It did not require many seconds for Mr. Souders to see that the harness had been tampered with,

and he said in a cheery tone, which was a delightful contrast to the one used a short time previous by his wife, as he pulled off his coat,—

“I reckon you an’ I have a big contract ahead of us, my boy. It would puzzle a lawyer to fix all these as they should be, and the most we can hope for is to put the sets together so the old women may go home. We’ll begin with mine, an’ see what can be made of the job.”

It was a long and tedious task, and before it had been half completed Jack was so well pleased with the gentleman that he said confidentially,—

“Mr. Souders, I don’t want you to think I tried to insult your wife. It was an accident which I couldn’t prevent, an’ you see for yourself I wasn’t to blame for this muss.”

“Don’t worry about it, my boy. Mother is a leetle hot-headed with a powerful dislike to youngsters ’cause she hain’t got any of her own; but I’ll venter to say she’s sorry as a cat this very minute for what’s been said an’ done. If you knowed her little ways you wouldn’t mind anything about it; but I’m put out to think she laid her hands on a poor cripple like you.”

“It wasn’t that which made me feel so bad as to have her think I would act mean.”

"She don't believe a word of what she said by this time, an' for that I'll go bail. There's no use talkin' 'bout it now; I allow you'll see her ag'in mighty soon. Have you been havin' a great deal of trouble with Bill Dean?"

Jack was not disposed to tell very much lest it should be thought he was complaining; but Mr. Souders finally succeeded in drawing from him a full account of the threats made.

"You sha'n't be troubled any more, my boy, that I'll answer for. Bill is pretty wild, but I reckon we can tame him down a bit before another day goes by."

"I wouldn't like any of the fellows to say I'd been carryin' tales, sir."

"Neither have you. Aunt Nancy's life is bein' worried pretty nigh out of her, an' that's enough to give me a right to interfere."

Jack did not think it proper to tell anything more regarding his experiences with the village boys, and, as a matter of fact, would have preferred saying nothing whatever to Mr. Souders until he had talked with Aunt Nancy.

Before the gentleman left the barn he so far sorted out the harness that it was possible to gear up his own team, and Jack thought best to get each one ready while he had the opportunity to call upon such a valuable assistant.

When the two returned to the house the supper was ended, and one of the ladies held Louis in her arms while Aunt Nancy and several of the guests washed the dishes.

Then Jack milked old crumple-horn, and when the last of the visitors departed all of the chores had been done, therefore nothing prevented he and Aunt Nancy from discussing the events of the day.

"I can't say I'm sorry William Dean cut up as he did," the little woman said, "for it has given Mr. Souders a chance to see what he really would do, and there is reason to believe the boy will be obliged to mend his ways."

Jack had very little interest in Bill Dean at that moment.

He was thinking only of the conversation he heard from the "fore-room," and had determined the matter should be settled finally before he retired.

"It seems as if most of the folks think I oughtn't to stay here makin' you feed me," he began.

"Bless my soul, what has put that idea into your head, my child?"

"I heard what Mrs. Souders said in the front-room before supper."

Aunt Nancy looked around quickly as a shade of displeasure passed over her face.

"I'm sorry you did hear it, Jack dear; but you must not be so foolish as to let it worry you. I am old enough to attend to my own affairs, and, even if I wasn't, Sarah Souders is not the one to whom I should go for advice."

"But, Aunt Nancy, my being here makes trouble for you with your neighbors, and I have been thinking it would be better for Louis an' I to go away at once."

"Your being here has very little to do with the trouble I may have. It is my own wicked self. I began by telling a lie to that man from Scarborough, and one sin surely leads to others. You are of great assistance to me, and I should be more sorry than I can say if you went away."

Jack was about to make some reply, but before the words could be spoken, Aunt Nancy checked him by laying her hand on his shoulder as she said,—

"Don't argue the matter, Jack dear. We are all tired enough to go to bed, and we'll make ready by searching the house again. After what has happened since noon it wouldn't surprise me the least little mite, if we found half a dozen burglars in hiding."

CHAPTER XV.

BROTHER ABNER.

WHEN Jack retired on this night he was far from feeling comfortable in mind.

Aunt Nancy had literally obliged him to cease speaking of the matter, and during the evening devotions prayed so fervently that she might be forgiven for acting a lie, it really distressed him.

She had done it solely for him, and he felt personally responsible for her mental trouble.

It caused the little woman great anxiety as he could well understand from the fact that she referred to the subject very frequently, and never ceased to sue for pardon.

As has been said, Jack did not think the little woman did any great wrong; but since she believed it, the case was as serious to her as if a deadly crime had been committed.

He remained awake a long while trying to decide what should be done, and more than once was he tempted to run the risk of calling upon

Farmer Pratt to explain all the circumstances, in order to relieve Aunt Nancy's mind.

To do this would be, as he firmly thought, neither more nor less than voluntarily condemning himself to the poor farm; but Louis would be safe from the ignominy, and he would be doing the little woman a very great favor.

He had decided upon nothing when sleep visited his eyelids, and on the following morning there was so much to be done around the house he could not find any opportunity to study the subject.

Aunt Nancy believed it necessary to clean nearly every portion of the house, and as a matter of course he assisted.

Louis was really neglected on this day. Having been allowed to play on the floor to his heart's content, neither his crooked guardian nor Aunt Nancy paid very much attention to him.

Not until late in the afternoon was the labor brought to a close, and then the tired ones sought rest under the big oak.

Jack was about to broach the subject which occupied the greater portion of his thoughts, when the rumble of wheels at the end of the lane caused him to look up in alarm.

"Who is that?" he asked excitedly, fearing lest it might be a messenger from Farmer Pratt.

"Only Deacon Downs. He sometimes stops on his way home from Treat's store to see if anything is needed. I buy a good many vegetables of him."

On this occasion the deacon had not called for any such purpose.

He reined in his horse near where Aunt Nancy was sitting, and, refusing her invitation to "get out and visit," unbuttoned his coat in a deliberate manner, saying slowly as he did so,—

"I found this 'ere for you down to Treat's, an' kinder 'lowed you'd be wantin' it."

Then fully a moment more was spent before the article referred to was produced, and, meanwhile, Aunt Nancy was in a mild state of excitement through curiosity.

"Something for me? What is it, Deacon?"

"Wait till I find the pesky thing. I put it in this pocket so there shouldn't be any chance of losin' it, an' now I wouldn't be surprised if it had slipped out."

Aunt Nancy came close to the wagon watching the old gentleman's every movement, her face expressing the liveliest impatience; but the visitor did not gratify her curiosity until having found that for which he sought.

"Here it is," he said, as he handed her a let-

ter, "an' seein's how it's stamped Binghamton, I wouldn't be surprised if it was from Abner, for I don't reckon you know anybody but him in York State, Nancy?"

"Of course it's from Abner, and you gave me almost a shock, Deacon, for I couldn't imagine what you had found of mine."

"I don't allow there's any bad news, eh?" and the visitor waited as if expecting Aunt Nancy would open the letter at once.

"It's only in regard to some business, Deacon," the little woman replied in a tone which told she did not intend to read the missive until she should be alone.

"I don't reckon he's thinkin' of comin' here this summer?"

"Dear me, no. Abner's getting too old to go gallivantin' 'round the country very much, an' it's a powerful long journey from here to York State."

"You're right, Nancy; but you know Abner allers was a master hand at travellin'."

Then the deacon, despairing of getting a glimpse of the letter, urged the aged horse into a slow trot, and the occupants of the Curtis farm were alone once more.

"The deacon is a real obliging neighbor,"

Aunt Nancy said as the rumble of wheels died away in the distance, "but terribly inquisitive. He thought I would read Abner's letter so he'd know what was going on, and perhaps I might have done so if it hadn't been concerning your business, which should be kept to ourselves."

"Do you s'pose he has found out anything about Louis's father?" Jack asked, eager to learn the contents of the letter, but not feeling at liberty to hurry the little woman.

"I don't think there is any doubt about it"; and Aunt Nancy tore open the envelope with a slowness and deliberation which was almost provoking.

During the next five minutes Jack waited impatiently to hear "brother Abner's" reply; but nothing was said until the letter had been read carefully twice over, and then Aunt Nancy exclaimed as she took off her spectacles,—

"Well, I declare!"

"Does he know the captain?"

"He's never heard of him! It's so surprising when I think of how many people he used to be acquainted with when he lived here."

"What does he say about it?"

"Nothing of any consequence, and writes as if he was provoked because I asked the question. Wants to know how I suppose he can find a man who was exploded in a vessel at sea; and I can't say but there is considerable good sense in his asking that, for of course when the ship blowed to pieces that settled the whole thing."

"But the captain might have been saved, and, besides, while we were in sight the 'Atlanta' looked whole and sound as before the explosion."

"But if she didn't go to pieces why hasn't the captain come after his son?"

This was a question which Jack could not answer, and had to remain silent.

"According to Abner's story, he don't know many of the York State folks except them as lives in Binghamton. Perhaps he's settling down, and isn't as newsy as when he was with me."

"If he can't help us, what are Louis an' I to do?"

"Stay here, of course."

"But, Aunt Nancy, I must try to find Louis's relations, even if his father and mother are dead."

"I reckon you're bound to do that somehow; but there's no sense in trying to walk to New York while the weather is so hot."

Then the little woman, as if believing the matter had been finally settled, began to speak of the subject which was very near her heart, and for at least the hundredth time Jack was forced to listen to her lamentations because of the equivocation when Farmer Pratt called.

It was particularly hard for him to remain quiet during her self-accusations, for now that it was useless to expect "brother Abner" could do anything in the way of learning the details concerning the fate of the good ship "Atlanta," it seemed in the highest degree important to decide upon some course of action.

He was well content to stay where he was a certain time; but it seemed as if he should have at least some idea of what was to be done in the future.

Aunt Nancy did not give him an opportunity to discuss the matter, however, and when the hour came to search the house for supposed burglars he was in a fine state of perplexity.

On the following morning it seemed as if the little woman had dismissed all such thoughts from her mind, for whenever she spoke to Jack it was upon anything rather than how he might best accomplish that which he believed to be his duty.

He noticed she was particularly tender toward

Louis, and gave him an unusual amount of attention when she thought he and she were alone.

It was on this day Mrs. Souders called, and during fully half an hour was closeted with Aunt Nancy, after which she met Jack in the yard when her greeting was more than cordial, but never a word was spoken in reference to the incidents of the day she allowed anger to overcome judgment.

Since Jack had not expected anything in the way of an apology, he was agreeably surprised by the change in her manner toward him, and felt that ample reparation had been made.

What the lady may have said to Aunt Nancy will never be known, for the little woman maintained the most perfect secrecy regarding it, despite the fact that Jack questioned her as closely as he dared.

It was on the evening of this day when they were sitting under the old oak, and Louis was playing in front of them, that Bill Dean walked boldly into the yard, accosting Aunt Nancy as if he and she were on the most friendly terms.

Jack was so thoroughly surprised that he experienced the sensation of one who has suddenly been plunged into cold water, for the assurance of the boy was more than he could

understand until Master Dean handed Aunt Nancy a printed circular, as he said,—

“I’ve been hired to carry these around, an’ I know you allers go to camp meetin’, so I stopped here first. I s’pose you think I’m kinder tough; but them as come here lookin’ for jobs without wantin’ to work ain’t so good as you believe they are.”

“I don’t intend to argue with you, William; but you know very well I have good reason to feel harsh toward you.”

“Why, what have I done?” and Bill looked as innocent as a lamb.

“It would be better if you asked what you haven’t done,” and the little woman spoke in the most severe tone. “In the first place you drove away a well-disposed boy last summer, and are now trying to do the same by poor little crippled Jack.”

“I don’t see how you can say sich a thing, Aunt Nancy”; and Bill assumed an injured expression.

“Didn’t you mix up the harness when the circle met here, and didn’t you try to drown the baby?”

“Me drown a baby?” Bill cried in a horrified tone.

"Yes, it was you and your friends who carried him to the duck pond and set him adrift on a raft."

"Now, Aunt Nancy, it ain't right to talk agin me in this way"; and a stranger would have said that Bill was on the point of crying.

"Why, William Dean, I saw you running away!"

"I ain't sayin' you didn't; but that's nothin' to do with the baby. When I came across the field he was at the pond, an' I didn't know what he might do to my raft. Before I got up to him he was sailin' like all possessed, an' when you came I run away for fear you'd want me to wade in after him."

Aunt Nancy's eyes opened wide in astonishment at this marvellous story, and while she felt convinced it was false, she would not accuse him of telling a lie without having something in the way of evidence against him.

"At least I know you fought with Jack because he wouldn't promise to go away," she said after quite a long pause.

Louis's guardian tried to prevent this last remark by a look, but was unsuccessful, and Bill replied boldly,—

"There ain't any use sayin' I didn't, 'cause it's

true; but us fellers only was doin' what we had a right."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, we've got a license from the s'lectmen to do all the chores 'round this neighborhood, an' had to pay a mighty big price for it. Do you s'pose we'll let any other fellers come in an' take the bread an' butter outer our mouths after we've scraped the cash together to pay the town tax for that kind of business?"

This statement was rather more than even Aunt Nancy could credit, and she said quite sharply,—

"William Dean, I won't have you standing there telling such wrong stories! You must think I'm a natural born idiot to listen."

"It's the truth all the same, and if Hunchie don't clear out he won't get along very easy. Good by, Aunt Nancy, I s'pose I'll see you at camp meetin', for all the old maids will be there."

Bill did not linger in the lane after this last remark, but went quickly out into the highway, leaving the little woman literally gasping with surprise and indignation.

"It's no disgrace to be an old maid," she said when it was once more possible for her to speak; "but I won't have an impudent boy like William

Dean throwing it in my face as if it was something to be ashamed about."

"I wouldn't pay any 'tention to him," Jack replied consolingly. "You're nicer than any woman I ever saw, an' he'd be only too glad if you was as much of a friend to him as you are to me."

Aunt Nancy leaned over and kissed the little cripple on the forehead as she said in a low tone,—

"You are a good boy, Jack dear, and would be a great comfort to me if we were never to part until the good God calls me home."

CHAPTER XVI.

A HURRIED DEPARTURE.

IT was not until the following morning that Aunt Nancy paid any particular attention to the circular regarding camp meeting which Bill Dean had brought.

Then, as Jack came in from milking, she said with a suddenness which caused the boy to start in surprise,—

“I have been thinking about the camp meeting. What is your opinion?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You remember the paper which William Dean brought last night?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it was the time-table of the trains which run to the grounds. Somehow your coming upset me so I had forgotten all about the meeting, and if I should miss it, it would be the first time since I was quite a young girl.”

“When does it begin?”

“Day after to-morrow.”

"Why don't you go? I can stay here an' take care of crumple-horn and Louis well enough."

"Bless you, child, I wouldn't think of leaving you alone three or four days."

"Would you be gone as long as that?"

"A great many stay the whole week, and I did one year; but it was almost too tedious."

"Well, both of us couldn't be away at the same time, an' —"

"Why not?"

"Because the cow must be milked an' put in the barn."

"Daniel Chick's daughters have always done that for me, and would again."

"But what about Louis?"

"I have been wondering whether I couldn't take him with me."

"It would be terrible hard work to lug a baby 'round all the time."

"If you went I should be relieved of the greater portion of that care."

"It seems as if you had pretty nigh made up your mind already."

"There is only one thing which prevents me, and I can't figure it out," the little woman said with an air of anxiety.

"What is it?" Jack asked in surprise.

"I don't know that it is prudent to spare the money. You see it won't be long now before the summer boarders come, and it costs a great deal to get ready for them."

Jack could make no reply. This was a question about which he was ignorant, and there was a certain hesitation on his part regarding the discussion of such a subject when he could do nothing to forward the matter by pecuniary aid.

No more was said until after breakfast, when Mrs. Hayes came in, looking excited and breathless.

"Haven't you done anything about going to camp meeting, Nancy Curtis?" she cried, as she swung the big rocking-chair around and would have sat on Louis had not Jack called her attention to the fact by pulling the baby from his dangerous position.

"I was just speaking about it, but don't know as I shall go."

"But you must, Nancy. The children can stay at my house."

"If I went they would go with me," the little woman replied, in a tone which told she was not willing to discuss that question.

"Very well, there is nothing to prevent. Daniel Chick will take his big tent, and he says

you're welcome to use as much of it as you want."

"He is very good, I'm sure."

"And you'll go, of course? It wouldn't seem like a camp meeting if you wasn't there; and, besides, we always look to you for the coffee. Deacon Downs says it's one of the pleasures of the week to drink Aunt Nancy's Mocha."

"I do try to get the best, and when that has been done any one can make it good," the little woman said as her withered cheeks flushed with pleasure at the compliment, while never for a moment did she fancy this praise might have been given only that she should supply the occupants of the tent with their morning beverage.

"Then it is settled, you will go?" and Mrs. Hayes arose to her feet. "I can't stop a minute, but felt I must run over to find out if you'd begun preparations."

"I haven't, and whether you see me there or not depends. I will let you know to-morrow."

"But you must go, because we won't take no for an answer."

Aunt Nancy shook her head as if to say the matter was very uncertain, and the visitor took her departure, insisting that the townspeople "couldn't get along without their coffee maker."

"I'm sure I don't know what to do," the little woman said with a long-drawn sigh when she and Jack were alone.

"If you haven't money enough, why not leave me an' Louis here alone? I'll be awful careful with the house, an' there can't any accident happen."

"I'm not afraid to trust you, Jack dear; but as I told Mrs. Hayes, it isn't to be thought of for a minute."

"Ain't there some way I might earn the money?"

"Bless you, no, child. Even if I was willing you should do such a thing, there isn't any time. The most expensive part of it is that I have always furnished the coffee for all in the tent, and it does take a powerful lot to go around. Why, Deacon Downs himself can drink three cups of a morning, an' then look around sort of wishfully for another. I always give it to him, too, if there's enough left in the pot."

Jack felt very badly because he could do nothing toward helping the little woman out of her difficulty, while Louis laughed and crowed as if he thought the whole affair decidedly comical.

Aunt Nancy bustled around the house performing a great deal of unnecessary work, her forehead

knitted into a frown which showed she was thinking the matter over in the most serious fashion, and Jack watched her every movement.

Finally the problem was solved, for her face lighted up as, taking Louis in her arms and seating herself in the rocking-chair, she said cheerily,—

“I don’t think William Dean would attempt to make trouble for you now, Jack dear.”

“Neither do I. Mr. Souders probably scolded him for mixin’ up the harness, and he won’t bother me.”

“Do you feel quite certain of that?”

“Indeed I do.”

“Then would it be too much of a walk for you to go to Treat’s store?”

“Of course it wouldn’t, Aunt Nancy. You’ve only to say the word, an’ I’ll be off like a shot.”

Jack had seized his hat as he spoke, and appeared to be on the point of rushing away without waiting for the message, when she stopped him by saying,—

“There’s no need of such haste. It will take me some time to fix the errand so you can do it. Last season Daniel Chick farmed the back field for me on shares, and I have quite a lot of wheat on hand. Mr. Treat wanted to buy it, and

now I'm going to accept his offer. In case he still wants it, you must bring back some things from the store."

"Am I to get the coffee?"

"No, that would be too large a bundle. I'll write Mr. Treat a letter, and the remainder of the business you can arrange."

Jack was delighted at being able to do something toward settling the vexed question, and waited very impatiently for the little woman to make her preparations.

This was quite a long task because a letter was to be written, and after that a list of articles prepared; but finally Aunt Nancy completed the work, and Jack set off at full speed with a generous supply of bread and butter in a neatly tied parcel.

He returned before she fancied he could have more than gotten there, and brought with him the goods required.

"Mr. Treat says he'll tell Daniel Chick to haul the wheat, and you shall know how much there is as soon as it can be weighed. If you want anything more you shall send for it."

"Did he say I could have some money?" Aunt Nancy asked anxiously.

"He told me to tell you to call on for cash or

goods up to thirty dollars, for he was certain it would amount to as much as that."

"Then everything will be fixed without any trouble, and I will tell Mrs. Hayes we shall go to the camp meeting. Now, Jack dear, lie down a little while and get rested so you can help me. We must do a great deal of cooking before to-morrow night."

During the remainder of the afternoon and the day following, the household was in as great a state of confusion and excitement as when arrangements were being made for the sewing circle.

Aunt Nancy, assisted by Jack, cooked provisions sufficient to have kept a much larger family in food fully two weeks; but the little woman explained she "never liked to go to camp meeting without having something to give those who might come hungry."

The neighbors, and, more particularly, Deacon Downs, had called to ascertain if "the coffee maker" was really going, and Daniel Chick promised to come for her with his wagon at an early hour the following morning.

The deacon agreed to attend to the transportation of the Mocha, and on the evening before the journey was to be made everything appeared to be in "apple-pie order," although to Aunt Nancy's

eyes the house was far from being in a proper condition.

Jack was both tired and excited.

The prospect of going to a camp meeting pleased him wonderfully, for he had never attended one, and fancied it was something intended for sport rather than anything serious.

The baskets were packed; Louis's suit of white clothes stiff with starch and without a blemish; Jack's boots were polished until they shone like a mirror; and Aunt Nancy spent considerable time bewailing the fact that she could not afford to buy him a new coat and pair of trousers.

Not until late was the little woman ready to retire, and it appeared to Jack as if he had just fallen asleep when she awakened him to milk the cow.

After feeding the animal it seemed as if a very long time would elapse before it would be possible for him to do the same again, and he patted her sleek sides affectionately as he explained that one of Mr. Chick's daughters would take his place during the next three or four days.

It isn't very likely the animal understood what he said, but she was perfectly willing to part with him, since it was to exchange the stuffy barnyard for the cool, inviting pasture.

The milk was strained and put out on the door-steps for Miss Chick, since Aunt Nancy could not take it with her, and then a hurried breakfast was eaten. None too soon, either, for the meal had just been finished when Mr. Chick drove up, fretting considerably because the party were not ready to get into the vehicle instantly he arrived.

Half a dozen times was Jack sent to make certain this door or that was fastened securely, and the owner of the wagon worked himself into a state of profuse perspiration before Aunt Nancy finally announced she was ready.

Jack thoroughly enjoyed the ride to the depot, four miles away.

The odor of the flowers and grasses was heavy on the cool air; the birds sang their hymns of thanksgiving that the new day had come; and the trees whispered together of the goodness of the Creator in making for his creatures such a beautiful place in which to live.

"It seems almost wicked to enjoy a scene like this when there are so many poor people who never see the country from one year's end to another," Aunt Nancy said, as she looked around in delight; and Mr. Chick replied, speaking much as if he had a cold in his head, —

"It's for us to take all the enjiment that comes in this world, an' leave others to bear the burdens which are put upon them."

"If that is good doctrine, Daniel Chick, I'd like to know how you'd fancied a dose of it when you was down with the rheumatiz an' depended upon the neighbors to gather the crops?"

"That was a different matter, Nancy Curtis."

"In what way?"

"Well, you see—I—I—p'rhaps I can't explain it so's you an' the children can understand; but there was a difference."

"Only because you can't put yourself in the situation of others. The Golden Rule is good enough for me yet, and I don't think I'll change it for yours."

This brief conversation had no effect on Jack, nor would he have thought it an important matter if Mr. Chick had attempted to prove the little woman was wrong. His faith in Aunt Nancy was so great that whatever she said was to him a truth not to be disputed.

On arriving at the depot it was learned they were fully an hour too early for the train, and Jack mourned the fact that he might have remained at home long enough to put the barn in better order.

It was a large party who intended to make the journey on this morning, and to Jack's dismay he saw Bill Dean and his particular friends arrive about half an hour before the time for leaving.

If it had been possible he would have remained out of sight; but the station was small, and Aunt Nancy insisted he should stand where she could keep her eyes on him, consequently it was not many moments before Master Dean recognized him.

"Oh, dear! *is* he going? and *must* we be in fear and trembling of him all the time we stay?" Aunt Nancy said pathetically as she saw the three boys approaching. "Keep close to me, Jack dear, and if he attempts any mischief I'll appeal for help to Deacon Downs."

Bill, however, did not intend to commit any overt act while there were so many around who would not hesitate about dealing out justice to him without delay.

He contented himself by walking slowly around Aunt Nancy and Jack, as he said to Jip Lewis,—

"I didn't think we stood so much of a chance to have a good time at camp meetin' this year. Here's Hunchie with the old maid, and we'll see that they don't get lonesome."

Fortunately Aunt Nancy did not hear him,

otherwise she might have said something which would have provoked further and louder threats.

Jack, however, could distinguish every word, and before the three tormentors finished their promenade he regretted having accompanied the little woman.

“I ain’t afraid they’ll get very much the best of me,” he said to himself; “but there isn’t goin’ to be a great deal of fun if I’ve got to keep my eyes open for them all the time.”

CHAPTER XVII.

CAMP MEETING.

WHEN the train drew up at the station, Jack was relieved at seeing his tormentors take their places in a car far ahead of the one he and Aunt Nancy occupied.

He anticipated no slight amount of enjoyment from this ride behind the iron horse, and it would be sadly marred if he was forced to listen to such remarks as Bill Dean and his friends would probably make.

Aunt Nancy sat by the window with Louis in her arms, and Jack took the seat beside her, watching everything around with the most intense interest, for it was the first time he had ever journeyed so far on the cars.

The little woman would have spent considerable of the money received from the sale of the wheat in buying for her crippled escort such articles as the newsboy brought, in the hope of tempting customers; but for the fact that Jack prevented her by whispering more than once,—

"You've paid enough for me already in buyin' the railroad ticket, an' you must save some to get things for the summer boarders."

"Bless you, child, I ought to be able to take a little pleasure now and then without thinking constantly of how many pennies there are in a dollar."

"But this time, Aunt Nancy, you are not using it for yourself. If you want any of the stuff, why, it's only right you should have it, but don't buy anything for me."

Then the little woman whispered as she laid her hand affectionately on his shoulder,—

"It's a comfort to have you around, Jack dear, for you are always thinking of others and never of yourself."

"A crooked feller like me don't need as much as other folks, an' I'm sure I get more'n I deserve."

"That could never be, my child," Aunt Nancy replied; and Jack fancied she wiped a tear from her eye, but it might have been nothing more than a cinder.

Judging from Louis's expressions of delight, he would have been pleased had the journey continued all day, and even Jack was a trifle disappointed because the tenting grounds were reached so soon.

The place at which they disembarked was not a village, but only a grove of pine-trees bordering the ocean, with a broad strip of shimmering white sand between the foliage and the water.

It was a little settlement of canvas houses among the pines, the gleaming white showing vividly amid the sober green, and the dusty paths here and there resembling yellow ribbons laid on to complete the harmony of color.

Jack would have remained a long while silent and motionless gazing in delight at the scene before him, now and then raising his eyes to view the heaving emerald bosom of the sea beyond, but that Aunt Nancy was impatient to "settle down" before the morning services should begin.

"It looks pretty, I know, Jack dear, but we mustn't stand dawdling here, because there is considerable work for us to do. I'll carry the baby, and you see what can be done with the bundles."

The two were literally laden to the utmost of their strength, as they stepped from the railway platform.

Such generous supplies had the little woman brought for their bodily comfort that quite an amount of the belongings would have been left

behind but for Deacon Downs, who kindly offered to take charge of the remainder of the goods.

In order to find Mr. Chick's tent it was only necessary to follow the party with whom they had travelled, and in a few moments the little woman was arranging her provisions in one corner of the huge tent which had been reserved for her use.

Jack hovered around helplessly.

He wanted to do something toward aiding Aunt Nancy, but camp life was so new to him he could do nothing more than watch her bird-like movements.

After pinning a towel around Louis's neck to avoid the possibility of soiling his white frock, the little woman gave him a small slice of bread and butter, offering some to Jack, but the latter was not hungry.

"If you don't care, I'd rather go down to the beach a little while."

"You shall do that later, Jack dear, but the morning services will commence very soon, and I want you with me then."

"Will it be a reg'lar meetin' where people preach an' pray like they do in a church?"

"Certainly, my child; and this is a church, for don't you remember it is said 'the groves were God's first temples'?"

Jack didn't remember anything of the kind, for his education had been so sadly neglected he could not read any but the smallest words, therefore made no answer, and as soon as Louis had satisfied his hunger the three went to the cleared space where the services were to be held.

Jack watched everything around him with intense interest, and, it must also be said, to such a degree that he failed to hear a single word spoken by the preacher.

Aunt Nancy sat with a look of devotion on her face, which to Jack was very beautiful.

After a time the boy saw the tears rolling down her cheeks, and listened to the words from the pulpit in order to learn what had caused such apparent sorrow.

The clergyman was speaking of those who keep the word, but not the spirit of God's laws, and he failed to find in the teaching anything which could distress the little woman.

When the sermon was concluded and the three were walking slowly through the grove, he understood better.

"It seemed as if the minister was talking directly to me, Jack dear," she said with quivering lips.

"I didn't hear him say anything that sounded

like it, Aunt Nancy, an' I listened a good deal of the time."

"It was the passage about obeying the word but not the spirit which applied to my case. You see I didn't *speak* a lie to Mr. Pratt, and might try to comfort myself with the idea I had not disobeyed the commandment; but the meaning of it is, I shouldn't deceive in the slightest manner."

"I wish we hadn't come here if you're goin' to think of that thing again."

"Again, Jack dear? Do you fancy it has ever been out of my mind?"

"I thought you'd kinder got over it."

"But I hadn't, and perhaps I was led to come here that I might realize even more fully what I have done."

"There isn't any need of that, Aunt Nancy"; and Jack began to look distressed. "Please put it out of your thoughts for a while, an' we'll go down on the beach."

"I can't, my child. You shall stroll around an hour, after which you must come back to the tent for dinner."

Jack hardly thought he ought to leave the little woman while she was feeling badly, but she insisted on his doing so, and he walked slowly away saying to himself,—

"I never knew religion hurt anybody; but I think Aunt Nancy has too much of it if she's goin' to fuss so over Farmer Pratt. It won't do to let her feel as she does, an' the whole amount of the story is I'll have to leave Louis here while I take the chances of gettin' into the poorhouse by explainin' things to him."

So deeply engrossed was he in his thoughts that no attention was paid to anything around until he was brought to a standstill by hearing a disagreeably familiar voice cry,—

"Hold on, Hunchie, we want to know where you left the old maid!"

Jack had halted involuntarily, and now would have moved on again in the hope of escaping from Master Dean and his friends, but they barred his way by closing in upon him.

There was a large crowd on the grounds surging to and fro, therefore the three boys had little difficulty in forcing Jack to move in this direction or that as they chose, by pretending the press was so great they could not prevent themselves from being pushed against him.

"We're goin' down for a swim," Bill Dean said as he linked his arm in the hunchback's, "an' it'll just about break our hearts if you can't come with us."



"I don't want to do anything of the kind. You know very well a crooked feller like me couldn't swim, no matter how hard he tried."

"We'll show you how, so don't be frightened"; and Bill motioned for Sam and Jip to force the intended victim along in the desired direction.

Jack knew perfectly well he could not struggle successfully against his tormentors, but at the same time he did not intend allowing them to take him away from the throng where he might find assistance if necessary.

"I don't want to go with you, and shall ask some of these people to help me if you don't go away."

"Then you'd only be makin' it all the hotter for yourself, 'cause we count on stayin' here the whole week, an' you can't be tied to the old maid's apron strings every minute of the time."

"I'll take my chances of that, so keep off or I'll make a disturbance."

Bill had good reason to believe the cripple would carry this threat into execution, and, not wishing to come in direct contact with the guardians of the peace, concluded to bring their sport to a close.

"Of course if you don't feel like comin' nobody's goin' to make you, so we'll say good by."

As he spoke he gave a quick twist of his foot in front of Jack, at the same instant Jip pushed from behind, and the result was the cripple fell forward on his face, in the gravel and sand.

The three boys were off like a flash, and as Jack rose to his feet after some effort, with dusty clothes and a bleeding face, his heart was filled with anger.

“If I was only strong enough I’d soon show them fellers what it is to pick on a fellow they thought couldn’t help himself!”

He had hardly said these words when a man brushed past him with the air of one who feels he has a right to considerably more than half the road, and looking up quickly Jack saw Farmer Pratt.

For an instant he thought the man was pursuing him, and would have taken refuge in flight, had not the idea occurred to his mind that Mr. Pratt had come to camp meeting for the same purpose as Aunt Nancy.

“I’m foolish to think he’s still chasin’ after me,” he said to himself, “though I s’pose he would take Louis an’ me with him if he saw us.”

Without knowing why he did it, Jack followed a short distance behind the farmer, as if it was necessary to retain him constantly in sight, and

while doing so thought of Aunt Nancy's distress concerning the alleged lie.

Now surely would be a good time to sacrifice his own comfort in order to ease her mind by taking upon his shoulders the blame, and he ran forward intending, for an instant, to speak with the gentleman.

Then it occurred to him that it would be proper to consult the little woman first, and he turned back only to doubt again.

It might distress Aunt Nancy yet more to know the farmer was on the grounds, and Jack wished he knew of some one who could give him the proper advice.

Deacon Downs was the only person he could think of, and yet he ought not to tell him of what Aunt Nancy had done.

"I've got to settle this thing myself," he said as he turned resolutely in the direction of the tent, "and the next thing to do is to talk with Aunt Nancy herself. She knows more goodness than all these people put together."

His mind once made up, he was eager to reach the tent, and ran at full speed, arriving just as Deacon Downs summoned the occupants of this particular dwelling to dinner.

The little woman was acting as cook, a post of

duty to which she had been elected each year because the remainder of the party knew she would perform the arduous labors without complaint.

To speak with her now would be to attract the attention of all, and Jack believed he should wait until a more convenient season.

Therefore he seated himself at the rough table around which all the others, save Aunt Nancy, were gathered, and tried unsuccessfully to appear as if nothing unusual had occurred.

Jack's face told of some trouble, however, and when the deacon had refreshed himself with a large cup of Aunt Nancy's Mocha, he asked in a severe tone,—

“Master Dudley, is it possible that after living with as good a woman as Sister Curtis, you allow your passions to tempt you into fighting? Don't you remember what Dr. Watts says about letting ‘dogs delight to bark and bite, for 'tis their nature,’ et cetera?”

Perhaps Jack might have understood the deacon's question, had it not been for the last word.

What an “et cetera” was he hadn't the slightest idea, and instead of replying sat staring stupidly at his plate until Aunt Nancy came forward and asked,—

"What is it about Jack? Has he been doing anything out of the way?"

"By the appearance of his face I should say he had. It is strange boys will fight in such a place as this!"

"Why, what *has* happened to you, Jack dear?" the little woman asked anxiously as she lifted the boy's head by placing her hand under his chin.

Jack said nothing, and Aunt Nancy asked, as the crimson spots appeared on her cheeks,—

"Has William Dean been troubling you again?"

"I had rather tell you some other time," Jack replied in a whisper, as he slipped down from his seat at the table and went toward the scene of the little woman's culinary operations.

She followed him at once, and the good but rather inquisitive deacon craned his neck in vain to hear what passed between the two.

"It was Bill Dean; but don't say anything about it now, for I've just seen Farmer Pratt," Jack said in a low tone; and as Aunt Nancy started in surprise, a cry of distress came from Deacon Downs's lips.

At the moment Jack spoke, the little woman was in the act of removing the coffee pot from the stove, for fear its contents should boil over, when it fell to the ground.

Neither Aunt Nancy nor the hunchback paid any attention to this catastrophe; but the deacon was so angry he even threatened that Jack should not be allowed near the tent again.

It is doubtful if his words were heard by the two who were in such distress of mind.

Aunt Nancy led Jack to the rear of the tent, and there, where no one could overhear, he told the whole story, concluding by saying,—

“You have felt so bad I had a great mind to go right up an’ tell him how it happened you acted a lie.”

“But, Jack dear, then he might drag you off to the poor farm.”

“I had rather do that than have you feel as you do about it. Louis could stay here, an’ I wouldn’t tell him where you were, no matter how hard he might try to make me.”

“I should go to him myself and confess all,” the little woman said after a pause.

“Then the chances are he’d get hold of both Louis an’ me. If it is to be done, I oughter do it.”

“I declare I don’t know what is best”; and Aunt Nancy stood with clasped hands as if expecting Jack would advise. “It is only right I should atone in some way for that which I did; but

the flesh is indeed weak when it comes to parting with either of you."

"Perhaps there might be some way for me to get clear, an' you'd feel so much better that I'd be contented to stay almost anywhere."

The little woman made no reply; she remained silent so long Jack began to be afraid she was ill, and as he stood watching her, the notes of a song of praise to the Maker rose high above the deacon's querulous tones, while mingling with it was the murmur of the surf as it rolled up on the beach, the whole forming a sort of melody which was soothing to the little hunchback.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DISASTER.

NOT for several moments was Aunt Nancy able to decide what should be done, and then, as the song died away leaving only the deacon's words to mingle with the reverberation of the surf, she said in a voice which sounded strained and harsh,—

“It must be done. You shall bring him here, and I will tell the story myself. When he comes, take Louis and walk down by the beach for a while.”

The little woman could say no more, for at that moment Deacon Downs asked in his blandest tones,—

“Do you think it would be possible to make a leetle more coffee, Sister Curtis?”

Aunt Nancy had never been known to refuse a request which involved only her own discomfort or labor, and on this occasion there was no exception to the rule.

“It will be ready in a few minutes, Deacon,” she replied in a trembling voice, at the same time

keeping her face turned from the party lest they should see the tears in her eyes.

Jack understood there was no necessity of any further conversation, therefore walked slowly away, feeling very much like a fellow who voluntarily goes to receive unmerited punishment.

He now had no fear of Bill Dean and his friends. The present trouble was so much greater than any they could cause him that it was as if this particular trio of boys never existed.

Not until he had walked to and fro for half an hour did he begin to realize it might not be possible to find the farmer amid the throng.

Each succeeding train brought additional worshippers or visitors to the grove, and the walks were so densely lined with people that he might have passed within ten feet of Mr. Pratt without seeing him.

Having made up his mind to that which he considered a sacrifice, he was impatient to have it finished, and walked rapidly until the afternoon was more than half spent; but all in vain.

It seemed more than probable he had gone home, or at least Jack so argued to himself, and returned to the tent looking as if suffering from some grievous disappointment.

Aunt Nancy was at the flap of the canvas house

with an expression of anxiety on her face, but the baby was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Louis?” Jack asked in alarm.

“Mrs. Hayes is taking care of him. I thought it best he shouldn’t be seen when Mr. Pratt came. Will he be here soon?”

“I couldn’t find him; he must have gone home.”

The little woman’s face lighted up wonderfully as she cried,—

“O Jack dear, I know it is wicked to say, but I am *so* glad! It is only right I should bear the burden I myself have caused; but the thought of losing you and the baby almost broke my heart.”

Then she kissed him on both cheeks, and again did he feel the moisture of her tears.

“Well, Aunt Nancy, you haven’t lost us yet awhile, an’ if Mr. Pratt has gone home that settles the matter for a while.”

“Yes, Jack dear, but the sin is yet to be atoned for; it is only a postponement of the evil day.”

“Any way there’s no need of worryin’ about it now. If, when we get home, you feel that he should know the truth, it won’t be much of a job for me to walk over to his house, an’ then,” Jack added with a feeble attempt at a smile, “they won’t have so far to carry me when I’m taken to the poor farm.”

"Don't talk in such a manner, my dear, for I am hoping it won't ever come to pass."

Jack made no reply.

He felt quite confident the farmer would insist on his going to the home for paupers, but no good could be done by further distressing the little woman.

"I declare I'd entirely forgotten you and I have had no dinner," she suddenly said with a nervous laugh. "I'll get some cold meat and bread, if there is any left; but it is astonishing how strong people's appetites are at the seashore, especially during camp-meeting time. We must get along without coffee, for the deacon fairly swam in that second pot I made."

"I don't feel so terribly hungry," Jack replied; "but I'll sit down for the sake of seeing you eat. As to the coffee, that don't trouble me; water is good enough for boys."

"It is more wholesome I admit; but there's nothing good enough for a dear heart like yours."

Then the little woman bustled around as Jack had seen her do at home, and in a few moments a most appetizing lunch was spread, the amount of food contradicting her fears that all the provisions had been consumed.

The two made a hearty meal, considering all

their troubles, and when it was concluded Jack helped Aunt Nancy set the tent to rights generally, so when the remainder of the party returned from afternoon services everything was in proper order.

Mrs. Hayes brought Louis with her, and after delivering him to Jack she said with a sigh of relief,—

“I declare, Sister Curtis, it is a real pleasure to come to camp meeting with you. It takes the care off of one entirely. I only wish I had your knack at going ahead. Now look at me; I’m almost worn out looking after the baby, and don’t feel as if I could do a stitch toward getting supper.”

The other ladies in the party appeared to be in the same condition of prostration, and the little woman, tired though she was from the labor of preparing and serving dinner for so many, meekly replied that she was perfectly willing to give them a rest by performing all the work.

Jack heard the compliment paid by Mrs. Hayes, and understood that it had been given only for the purpose of getting the little woman to continue on while the others enjoyed their leisure.

“I’m goin’ to help you, Aunt Nancy,” he said in a low tone as he went toward the stove where she

was making ready to bake some biscuit. "It's too bad for you to do all this work while the others are havin' a good time."

"Oh, I don't mind it, dear, so long as I can be of service to some one. We are put in this world to help others, and it should be a pleasure."

"But you're doin' all instead of helpin'. Now tell me what I can do, if you're bound to wait on the whole crowd."

"Take care of the baby, that will be enough."

"He'll stay around here all right," Jack replied as he placed the little fellow on the grass, giving him some smooth stones to play with.

Then he set about assisting Aunt Nancy, working so industriously that Deacon Downs said in a tone of faint approbation,—

"That there little hunchback seems right handy if he wants to, an' if he wasn't so given to fightin' it might be a good thing for Aunt Nancy to have him around; but when once a boy gets as quarrelsome as this one, it ain't much use trying to make anything out of him."

The majority of the party were of the same opinion, and from that time forth it was believed, at least by those who were present when the deacon spoke, that Jack was a boy who would fight under the slightest provocation.

Not until the bell had rung as a signal that the evening services were about to begin did Jack and Aunt Nancy cease their labors.

The other occupants of the tent had already departed, and the little woman and her assistant were so tired it seemed almost too great an exertion to walk to the auditorium.

“Why not go to bed?” Jack asked. “I’ll take care of Louis until he gets sleepy, an’ then bring him to you.”

“No, it would be wrong to remain here when so many truths will be presented, simply because I chance to be tired.”

“Then we’ll all go”; and Jack lifted Louis in his arms.

Aunt Nancy enjoyed the services so much that Jack was very glad she had come; but as for himself he believed the time would have been quite as profitably spent in sleeping.

On the following morning at daybreak Deacon Downs aroused the hunchback with a harshly spoken command to build the fire and awaken Aunt Nancy when it was burning.

“Are you goin’ to make her do all the work?” Jack asked as he started to his feet.

“Don’t be impudent!” the deacon said sternly, raising his cane threateningly. “Learn to do as you are bidden, and in silence.”

Jack made no reply, but felt that the little woman whom he loved so dearly was being imposed upon.

As for Aunt Nancy, she appeared to have no such idea.

Jack awakened her as he had been told, and she arose from the bed of straw on which she had lain without undressing, uttering no word of protest.

"I would have let you sleep till noon, but the deacon told me to, an' was kinder mad when I asked if you'd got to do all the work," Jack said, his tones proving there was yet anger in his heart.

"You shouldn't have said anything about it, my dear, for it is a pleasure to me."

"You try to think it is, but I know it's nothin' more than hard work, while the others are enjoying a long nap."

"We won't say any more about it, Jack dear. Don't you think you could get me some water?"

"Of course I can"; and Jack labored with a will, relieving the tired-looking little woman whenever it was possible.

The second day at camp meeting was spent by these two in much the same manner as the first, as regards work, and Louis received very little attention.

Jack, in obedience to Aunt Nancy's request, looked again for Mr. Pratt, but with no better success than before; and after dinner he washed the dishes in order that the little woman might attend the afternoon services.

It was a decided relief to him when the day came on which they were to return home.

He knew Aunt Nancy had worked too hard, and the bustle and confusion tired him almost as much as the labor.

Gladly he helped gather up the empty baskets, and when the three were on the cars being whirled rapidly toward home, the little woman said with a sigh of relief,—

“What a comfort it will be to find ourselves on the farm once more, Jack dear! I believe I am getting too old to go to such places, and a week's rest wouldn't be too much to make me feel like myself again.”

“If you had gone alone, without tryin' to run a boardin'-house for them who didn't care whether you had any fun or not, it would have been different.”

“You don't look at the matter in the proper light, my child. They've always been accustomed to having Aunt Nancy go at such times, and I couldn't disappoint them as long as I was able to hold up my head.”

Jack realized it was useless to continue this conversation, so far as convincing the little woman that she had been imposed upon was concerned, and he remained silent.

Never before had the farm looked so beautiful, either to Jack or the little woman, as when they arrived home that night, and during the evening devotions Aunt Nancy's thankfulness was made apparent by the fervently spoken words.

The hunchback's first care, after opening the house, was to visit the barn to assure himself old crumple-horn had been well taken care of; but he could not gain much information in the darkness.

The animal was lying in her stall, and appeared to be in good condition.

Notwithstanding the fact that the house had been closed four days, the search for burglars was made before retiring, and then Jack, after seeing Louis tucked snugly in Aunt Nancy's bed, went to his cosey little room feeling confident he would never again have any desire to attend another camp meeting.

When the morning came he went out with a light heart to milk the cow, but to his great surprise still found her lying down.

All in vain did he urge her to get up; she refused to move, nor would she pay any attention

to the tempting lunch of sweet clover he placed in front of her.

Running back to the house he summoned Aunt Nancy, and both spent fully an hour alternately coaxing and petting the animal.

"She is very sick, Jack dear, there can be no question about that," the little woman said as her eyes filled with tears. "It would grieve me if she should die, for I have owned her a long while."

"How many years?"

"I hardly know; but it can't be less than eighteen."

"Then she must be dying of old age."

"I will go right over to Daniel Chick's and ask him to come here. He's a master hand at doctoring animals."

Then before Jack could offer to go in her stead, Aunt Nancy started down the lane bareheaded, which showed how deeply she felt the possible loss of her pet.

In a short time Mr. Chick arrived with the little woman, and his verdict brought no relief to Aunt Nancy's heart.

"All you can do is to knock her in the head, for she'll never get up again. It's kinder tough on you, I'll admit, for that cow has been a power-

ful help, 'specially when the summer boarders are here; but it won't do any good to fret."

Aunt Nancy made no reply, but walked slowly to the house as if desirous of being alone.

"She feels mighty bad I allow," Mr. Chick continued, speaking to Jack. "I've said many times I didn't know how Aunt Nancy would get along if it wasn't for the cow, an' now I reckon she'll be eatin' her bread without butter."

"What will she do when the boarders come?"

"That's what I don't know"; and Mr. Chick walked away as if he had no further concern in the matter.

Jack sat down where he could watch crumple-horn and at the same time think over this disaster which had come to the little woman.

While he was trying to form some plan, the poor old cow laid her head on the sweet-scented clover, gave a few short gasps, and ceased breathing as if from sheer weariness.

Jack stood over her a moment, and then returned to the house, arriving there just as Aunt Nancy was emerging with Louis in her arms.

"I wouldn't go out there"; and he motioned toward the barn.

Aunt Nancy looked at him an instant, appearing

to understand what he meant, for she re-entered the house, leaving Jack on the doorstep in a profound study.

He could hear Louis's voice from the "fore-room" now and then, therefore it was not necessary to tell him the little woman had gone there to hide her grief.

"I must do somethin'," he said to himself, "an' what I first thought of seems to be the only show."

Then going to the door of the "fore-room" and knocking gently, he said in a low tone,—

"Aunt Nancy, could you spare me a little while?"

"Where are you bound, Jack?"

"I'd like to run down to Treat's store if you don't care."

Aunt Nancy opened the door, and Jack noticed her eyes were red from weeping.

"What is your idea of going there?" she asked in surprise.

"I've got some business that I'd rather not explain till I get back."

"There's nothing to prevent, my child, and I can trust you not to do anything wrong."

"I should hope you could," Jack replied emphatically. "You shall know all about it when I come home."

“Don’t try to walk too fast, but return as soon as your business is finished.”

Jack promised to do so, and was hurrying up the lane when the little woman stopped him with these words:—

“I wish you would call at Daniel Chick’s and tell him what has happened. It will be necessary to bury poor old crumple-horn, and he must attend to it.”

“I’ll ask him to come over right away”; and Jack resumed his journey, wondering whether he was on the point of doing that for which Aunt Nancy would censure him.

“It doesn’t make any difference whether she does or not,” he said to himself. “If I told her she wouldn’t let me go, so this is the only way to fix it.”

CHAPTER XIX.

JACK'S PROPOSITION.

JACK called at Mr. Chick's house, saw that gentleman and got his promise to bury old crumple-horn at once, after which he continued on past Bill Dean's home, fearing no trouble from him since he was yet at the camp grounds.

On arriving at the store he found Mr. Treat alone, and was greeted with the question,—

“Hello! Here's Aunt Nancy's young man! How's the old lady after her trip to the grove?”

“She is well, but tired.”

“I'll warrant that. When folks want to go off for a good time they invite Nancy Curtis, reckonin' she'll do whatever work there is without grumblin', an' they ain't far out of the way, either. Did the deacon get his full share of that Mocha she bought?”

“I don't know, sir; but I guess so, I didn't hear him findin' fault.”

“Then you can count on his havin' been filled up; *he* don't buy very much of that kind of coffee when it's him as has to foot the bills.”

Jack had no interest in this subject, and changed it abruptly by saying,—

“Aunt Nancy’s cow died this mornin’.”

“Sho! How’d that happen?”

“Mr. Chick thought it must be old age.”

“Well I reckon it was. That cow has been in the family quite a spell.”

“It’ll be hard on Aunt Nancy not to have the milk.”

“I ’low you’re ’bout right, sonny; it helped make up a good bit of the old woman’s livin’, an’ she hasn’t so much money but that a dollar makes a big difference.”

“That’s true, an’ I’ve come to see if I can’t help her out in some way.”

“You?” and Mr. Treat looked up in surprise. “Why, I thought you hadn’t any great amount of cash on hand.”

“And I haven’t; but I thought perhaps I might make a trade with you.”

“Want to have a dicker of some kind, eh? Well, what have you got to show up?” and Mr. Treat selected from a pile of pine wood a convenient stick to whittle, as he assumed a more comfortable attitude preparatory to indulging in his favorite pastime of “dickering.”

“I haven’t got anything, sir; but thought

there might be work I could do around here till I'd earned enough to buy Aunt Nancy another cow."

Jack stammered and hesitated until it was a positive pleasure both to himself and the store-keeper when the speech was finally ended.

"What can you do?" Mr. Treat asked thoughtfully as he fashioned with infinite care the bit of wood into a toothpick.

"Almost anything, sir. I'd be willin' to work very hard if I could get the job."

"Have you got any idea what the jobs 'round here might be?"

"It don't make any difference; I'm not afraid of bucklin' down to them."

"How much do you count on earnin'?"

"I want to get enough to buy a cow for Aunt Nancy."

"Do you know what one is worth?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Treat was silent for a moment as if revolving some very weighty matter in his mind, and said slowly,—

"I've got jest sich a cow as would suit Aunt Nancy; she's a good one, an' I wouldn't like to part with her for nothin'. Now, if you'd do the chores 'round here this summer, an' she would put

in some of the money I owe for the wheat, we might strike a trade."

"But I don't want her to pay anything."

"Thought you could do it all yourself, eh?"

"I hoped so," Jack replied in a tone of disappointment.

"Why, I don't reckon you'd earn it in a year. I'd want forty dollars at the very lowest figger for my cow, an' it would take a mighty smart boy to git that much in twelve months."

Jack could no longer conceal his feelings, and, seeing he was pained because of the failure of his plans, Mr. Treat continued in what he intended should be a soothing tone,—

"I'd be willin' to allow you twenty dollars for a summer's work previdin' you'd board yourself at Aunt Nancy's. Then she'd only be called on to pay as much more, an' have twice as good a cow as the one that's dead."

"How long do you say the summer should last?"

"Well, I wouldn't be hard on you, an' we'd call it quits by the middle of November."

"How much of that time would it be necessary for me to stay in the store?"

"From five o'clock in the mornin' till nine at night, the same as is expected of other boys."

It was the last blow to Jack's hopes. His duty to Louis would prevent him from remaining in this section of the country such a length of time, and it was essential he should assist Aunt Nancy in order to pay her for the food he and Louis consumed.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Mr. Treat asked, as the boy stood irresolutely for a moment.

"I couldn't because I can't stay here as long as that, and, besides, I must do something for Aunt Nancy to earn our board."

"That's right, my boy. There's no harm done because we didn't make a trade; but it shows I'm willin' to help along all I can in a case like this."

"I'm much obliged to you," Jack replied faintly, and then he started up the road once more, walking decidedly faster than when he came.

He had counted on being able to ease the sorrow in Aunt Nancy's mind by buying for her a cow as good as the one she had lost.

He was revolving in his mind half a dozen plans by which the desired result might be attained, when a voice from the opposite side of the road caused him to halt.

"How's Aunt Nancy by this time?"

It was Mr. Souders who spoke, and because that gentleman had been so kind to him on the day when the sewing circle met at the little woman's house, he decided to tell him the whole story, not from any expectation of receiving assistance, but in order to relieve his mind.

Mr. Souders listened attentively to all he had to say, and then replied,—

“Treat was trying to swindle you. His cow isn't worth ten dollars, to say nothing of forty, an' he wasn't over an' above anxious to give you too much for your work. Let the matter drop a couple of days an' I'll see what can be done. We mustn't allow Aunt Nancy to suffer.”

There was a world of encouragement in the gentleman's tones, and Jack felt as if half his troubles had already been removed.

“I'm willin' to do anything I can towards earnin' the money to buy one; but Louis an' I mustn't stay here till November, an' I don't want her to use her own money.”

“That will be all right, my lad. Go home now, an' I'll see you later.”

Jack's heart was quite light when he walked swiftly down the lane leading to the tiny house, but became heavy again when he saw the little woman's face.

It was evident Aunt Nancy was mourning deeply the loss of her pet, and the cripple felt that as yet he had nothing tangible to assuage her grief.

She looked up inquiringly as he approached, but he offered no explanation regarding his journey until the question had been asked directly, and then said hesitatingly,—

“I would rather not tell you, Aunt Nancy. I thought I might be able to do something, but it was a failure, an’ the less we say about it the better.”

“Jack dear,” and the little woman was very grave, “when a boy can’t tell his friends what he has been doing it looks as if there was something of which to be ashamed.”

“But in this case there isn’t, Aunt Nancy; cross my throat if there is.”

“I believe you, my child, but would have much preferred if there had been perfect confidence between us.”

Jack looked up in positive alarm.

The little woman’s tone was so different from what he had ever heard before when she was addressing him, that he actually felt frightened.

“I’ll tell you all about it,” he said quickly; but Aunt Nancy held up her hand to prevent his saying anything more.

"If it is something which you wish to keep a secret from me I don't want to hear it."

Now Jack was distressed, for there could be no question but that he had displeased his best friend.

"Please listen to me, Aunt Nancy. I did say I wasn't going to tell you, because I thought perhaps you'd think I was meddlin'. That is, you might have thought so after I failed; but if the thing had gone through all right you'd been glad."

Then, disregarding entirely her gestures for him to remain silent, he told all the story save that relating to his interview with Mr. Souders.

It was yet possible old crumple-horn's place would be filled, but he believed it best not to raise any false hopes.

When he concluded Aunt Nancy took his face in her hands, bending his head over until she could kiss his cheeks, when she said in a tremulous voice,—

"Jack, you are a dear, good boy, and have been a blessing to me from the hour you first came into this house; but you must not think of taking any such load upon your shoulders. I would not have permitted it even had you been able to make a satisfactory bargain with Mr. Treat, and that is

what no person has ever done before to my knowledge. It was not right to keep from me anything you wished to do, and it is proven in this case, for if I had known what you thought of attempting, I could have explained how useless it would be."

"It didn't seem so to me, Aunt Nancy, and I surely believed I could earn more than twenty dollars by working all summer."

"Not for such a man as the storekeeper. Now you will be obliged to walk over to Daniel Chick's twice each day for milk, and that will be more labor than taking care of poor old crumple-horn."

"Perhaps you may get another cow, Aunt Nancy."

"It is impossible, at least during this year. I spent more money at camp meeting than I could afford, and must now pay the penalty when the summer boarders come by being forced to buy both milk and butter. It will make a big hole in my earnings."

Now that there was no cow to care for, the work in Jack's particular department was very light, and, as he said to Aunt Nancy, it seemed as if he had hardly begun before the whole was done.

The walk to Daniel Chick's was not as pleasant

as taking care of old crumple-horn, and besides, he would be forced to pass Bill Dean's house twice each day, a fact which caused him no little disquietude; but he said nothing regarding this to Aunt Nancy.

The following forty-eight hours passed very quietly on the farm.

The little woman was so thoroughly tired from her labors at camp meeting that she did not have the ambition to bustle around as usual, and the greater portion of her time was spent with Jack in the garden.

It is probable that no collection of vegetables ever received more care than was bestowed by these enthusiastic gardeners.

The smallest weed was detected and instantly pulled up by Aunt Nancy, while Jack loosened the ground around the roots of each tiny plant until it seemed certain they would be dwarfed.

Much to Jack's discomfort, hardly an hour passed when the little woman did not make some reference to Mr. Pratt, and constantly bewailed the fact that she failed to see him.

"But it wasn't your fault I couldn't find him, Aunt Nancy," Jack finally said.

"I suppose not; but yet it seems as if my cowardice had something to do with it."

"You know that couldn't be so, Aunt Nancy; but if you want me to I'll walk over to his house. It ain't so terribly far."

This proposition had the effect of reducing the little woman to silence, and during three or four hours Louis' guardian heard nothing regarding the man whom he had every reason to consider an enemy.

Late on the afternoon of the third day after he had talked with Mr. Souders, that gentleman's wife drove up, and instead of alighting to call upon Aunt Nancy, said quite sharply,—

"Samuel wanted me to drive over here for Jack."

"Why, what is the matter?" The little woman asked in alarm.

"Nothing very serious, Nancy Curtis, so don't begin to fret. Sam always was full of whims, an' I reckon this is one of 'em."

Jack fancied he knew what was wanted, and his heart was very light when he clambered into the wagon.

"I'll come right back," he cried, as the carriage rolled away, and Aunt Nancy sat looking at Louis as if speechless with astonishment.

"Is it about the cow?" Jack asked of Mrs. Souders, who sat stiff as a statue and quite as

forbidding looking, holding the reins tightly in both hands, and paying no attention to the cripple.

She nodded her head, and Jack could not but wonder if she thought her breath too valuable to be wasted in words.

This was the extent of the conversation during the ride of ten minutes or more, and the hunchback felt decidedly relieved when it came to an end.

Mrs. Souders, silent and stern, was quite as disagreeable a companion as Mrs. Souders angry.

The cause of his having thus been summoned was, as he had hoped, a cow.

In the yard, with a halter on her head and a card tied to her horn, stood a meek-eyed animal which Jack thought a model of her kind.

Mr. Souders came from the shed as the hunchback alighted, and cried in his hearty, cheery voice,—

“What do you think of that, lad? Talk about Treat’s cow; why, she can’t hold a candle side of this one, and there was a big difference in the price.”

“Is it for Aunt Nancy?”

“Sartin, an’ I sent for you to lead her over to the little woman.”

“But who’s to pay for her?”

“That part of the transaction has been settled already, an’ all you have to do now, is to take the creater away.”

“But I wanted to do somethin’ toward buyin’ her.”

“So you have, my boy. Can you read writin’?”

“Not very well.”

“Then come here while I tell you what’s on the card. I got one of Daniel Chick’s daughters to fix it up so’s it would be kerrect.”

Then Mr. Souders, after wiping his glasses lest a single word should escape his attention, read the following:—

“TO AUNT NANCY CURTIS
FROM
JACK DUDLEY,
TO WHOM THIS COW WAS PRESENTED BY
SARAH SOUDERS,
IN TOKEN OF HER REGRET FOR THE UNKIND
TREATMENT WHICH HE RECEIVED
AT HER HANDS.”

“You see,” Mr. Souders explained confidentially as he finished reading the inscription,

"mother has been sorry about what happened over to Aunt Nancy's, jest as I said she would be, an' this is kind of a peace-offerin' to you, at the same time a good turn is done the old woman."

"Then no one else paid for the cow? Your wife did the whole thing?"

"I may have chipped in a bit; but that don't count. Its mother's present to you an' Aunt Nancy, an' I'm right glad of the chance to help the little woman along. She'd be in mighty hard lines this summer if she had to buy butter an' milk."

Jack hardly knew what to do or say.

He was delighted almost beyond bounds at being able to take the cow to Aunt Nancy, and at the same time it seemed necessary he should thank Mrs. Souders, but was at a loss to know how it was to be done.

"Where is your wife?" he asked after a pause.

"In the house, an' I reckon she's locked the door. Better not try to say anything to her. Mother's peculiar, an' flies off dreadfully sometimes, but her heart's in the right place, my boy, which makes up for a good many faults. Lead the creater home now, an' I'll venter to say you'll

enjoy seein' Aunt Nancy dance when she knows its hers."

Jack would have attempted to thank Mr. Souders, but the gentleman prevented him by unfastening the cow's halter, and insisting that the animal be led away at once.

CHAPTER XX.

BILL DEAN.

JACK was a very proud boy when he came down the lane to the farmhouse leading the docile animal by the halter.

He hoped to reach the door before Aunt Nancy should see him; but the little woman was sitting under the old oak wondering what business Mr. Souders had on hand which required the cripple's presence.

He was half way from the main road to the house when she saw him, and cried in astonishment,—

“ Bless my soul, Jack, have you been and made a trade with Mr. Treat after what I said ? ”

“ Indeed I haven't ! Jest wait till you see what's on this beauty's horn, an' then you'll know all about it.”

Aunt Nancy could not curb her curiosity until the animal was led in, but ran forward with Louis in her arms, Jack stopping the cow that she might read that which was written on the card.

The little woman was bewildered.

She could hardly realize the animal was a present until Jack repeated again and again what Mr. Souders had said, and then it was the hunchback's turn to be bewildered, for instead of expressing her gratitude, she sat down on the grass, regardless of possible stains to her dress, and began to cry heartily.

"Why, I thought you'd be glad," Jack said in a tone of disappointment, while Louis pulled at the little woman's ringlets to show his sympathy for what seemed to be grief.

"So—so—so I am—Jack dear; but—but—it doesn't seem right that people should do so—so—so much for me."

"It wouldn't be enough if they'd sent a thousand cows."

"But for you I might never have had poor old crumple-horn replaced."

"Of course you would. That was wrote on the card only to make me feel better about what Mrs. Souders did; but she'd given you this all the same."

Aunt Nancy refused to look at it in that light, and Jack became confused at being overwhelmed with thanks.

The little woman insisted on tracing the gift

directly to his visit to Treat's store, thus giving him nearly all the credit, until the conversation became really painful.

"Let's take her out to the pasture, for she must be hungry by this time," he said, as a means of putting an end to the words of gratitude which he believed were undeserved.

This aroused Aunt Nancy to a sense of the situation as nothing else could have done, for the thought that anything around her might be suffering would always cause her to forget herself, and she followed Jack, who had lifted Louis to the cow's back to give him a ride.

It was a sort of triumphal procession which halted at the pasture bars in order that Aunt Nancy might inspect more closely her new pet.

"Seems wrong to say anything disparaging of poor old crumple-horn after she has served me faithfully for so many years, but I must confess this cow looks as if she might be a better milker."

"I'll bet she's the best in town," Jack replied enthusiastically, as he pulled clover for the gentle animal to eat.

"Not quite that, Jack dear, for Deacon Downs has a Jersey that leads everything."

"At any rate his cow can't be as kind as this one."

"That may be," Aunt Nancy replied medita-

tively as she kissed the fawn colored nose. "I do really think we couldn't have found a better substitute for poor old crumple-horn."

Then the animal was examined critically, without a single flaw having been found, and not until half an hour was spent in this manner could she be allowed to enter the pasture.

Aunt Nancy thought it her duty to see Mrs. Souders at the earliest opportunity in order to thank her for the gift, and decided to do so on the following morning when the breakfast dishes had been cleared away.

Jack went to clean the stall in the barn for the new cow's occupancy, and was working industriously when he fancied he heard a cry of distress coming from the direction of the duck pond.

His first thought was that Louis had strayed again, but on looking out, both he and the little woman were seen under the big oak, apparently as happy and contented as well could be.

Believing he had been deceived by his fancy, he resumed the work, but only to stop an instant later as the cries sounded more distinct.

This time there could be no mistake, and he ran toward Aunt Nancy as he asked,—

"Do you hear that noise? I'm goin' to see what it means."

As he went rapidly across the fields without waiting for a reply, the little woman followed him, but her pace was slow because of having the baby in her arms.

The cries continued almost incessantly, and by them Jack was guided to a clump of large trees standing near one end of the pond within a few yards of the spot where Louis had been set adrift on the raft.

It was not necessary to search long for the sufferer.

Lying on the ground, held firmly down by a huge limb of a tree which had fallen across his breast in such a manner that he could not use his arms, was Bill Dean.

His face was pale, whether from pain or fear Jack had no means of ascertaining, for the boy did not wait to be questioned, but cried pitifully,—

“O Hunchie, help me outer this scrape an’ I won’t ever play tricks on you agin!”

This promise was not necessary to enlist Jack’s sympathy.

It was a boy in agony and not an enemy he saw before him; the only question in his mind was how the rescue could be effected.

“Lay still, an’ I’ll do the best I can; but it

may hurt a little more when I try to lift the limb."

Kneeling that he might get his shoulder under one end of the heavy branch, Jack tried to raise it, but in vain.

He was making the second effort, Bill moaning piteously meanwhile, when Aunt Nancy arrived, and she, like Jack, thought only of relieving suffering.

"Where are you hurt, William?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know, but it seems as if the ache was all over my body."

"How did the accident happen?"

"I was choppin' this limb off to build a new raft, an' it fell on me."

"Can you lift it, Jack dear?"

"I'm afraid not; it's terribly heavy."

"Let me help you."

The two strained and tugged all to no purpose, when, as he paused to regain his breath and wipe the perspiration from his face, Jack said,—

"I could cut away part of it if I had an axe."

"Mine is around here somewhere," Bill said with a groan.

Jack soon found the tool, and, working very cautiously lest he should cause the sufferer yet



more pain, chopped here and there to remove the larger twigs, while Aunt Nancy bathed Bill's pale face with her handkerchief wetted in the pond.

It required nearly half an hour of the most fatiguing labor to perform the task, and then Jack said as he threw down the axe,—

“When I lift on this end you must try to pull him out, Aunt Nancy.”

The first attempt was a failure, but at the second the little woman succeeded, and Bill was drawn from his uncomfortable position looking decidedly the worse for wear.

“Can you stand up?” Aunt Nancy asked solicitously as she brushed the dirt from Bill's hands, and little Louis patted his cheek to show he wished to take some part in the rescue, even though it only was to display sympathy.

“I'll try,” Master Dean said meekly, and, with the aid of Aunt Nancy and Jack, the sorrowful looking bully arose to his feet.

It was positive the bones of his legs were not broken, for he stood erect without difficulty, and, this having been ascertained, Aunt Nancy proceeded to make a careful examination of his arms and chest.

“I do not believe you are seriously injured, William,” she said with a sigh of relief. “There

can be no doubt but that you will be very lame for a few days; you must bear with it, and thank your Father it is no worse."

"My father didn't have anything to do with it. He'd given me Jesse if he knowed I was here cuttin' down the tree."

"I mean your Father in heaven, William, who watches over even the sparrow's fall."

Bill looked rather shamefaced at having made such a mistake, and said as he turned half away from his rescuers,—

"I told Hunchie I wouldn't bother him any more if he'd help me out, an' I'm goin' to stick to my promise."

"It would have been much better if you had arrived at that conclusion before you were in need of assistance," Aunt Nancy replied gravely. "One should do right because it is his duty, and not as a reward to others."

"What's the matter now?" Bill asked in surprise. "Do you want me to keep on roughin' it into him?"

"Certainly not, and I am glad you made the promise. What I meant was that it would have been better had you done so because you wished to."

"But I didn't till now."

"We won't speak of it further now. Go home and ask your mother to rub the bruises with liniment. When you feel inclined I would like to have you come to see Jack and me."

"I ain't goin' 'round to be preached at," Bill replied in his old defiant tone. "There was enough of that at camp meetin' to last a feller a month."

"I did not see you at the services."

"Once I had to go when mother caught me jest as the bell was ringin', an' its the last time I'll get in the same box."

Aunt Nancy shook her head sadly.

She was discouraged, but not so much as to give up the struggle, for it was her intention to renew it again at a more "convenient season."

"We had best go back, Jack dear, and William will come to-morrow to tell us how he feels.

"I ain't so sure 'bout that, if you're goin' to stuff a feller with a lot of sabbath-school talk," Bill said sulkily, as he picked up the axe and started across the fields without further thanks to his kind friends.

"He doesn't seem like a very good boy at heart," Aunt Nancy said sadly, as she raised Louis in her arms; "but we must not judge by outward appearances. I almost feel condemned

for saying anything when my own sin has not been atoned for. My mind would be much easier if I had seen Mr. Pratt at the meeting."

"It won't take long to fix that," Jack replied, noting with sorrow the look of pain which had come over the little woman's face. "It will do jest as well if I go there an' tell him what you wanted to say."

"But then you would be where they could easily carry you to the poor farm."

"Well, s'posen they did, what would that 'mount to side of makin' you feel good? Besides, don't you believe Mr. Souders could make them let me out?"

"Perhaps he might; I never thought of that."

"I'll leave here to-morrow mornin', an' by night be there."

"Bless your heart, child, I would never think of letting you walk that long distance. If we should make up our minds that it was best to go, and I wish I *could* have the strength to say it, you'd ride in the cars."

"Why not decide now?"

"Because, Jack dear, it nearly breaks my heart to think there is a possibility of being obliged to give you up."

"Well, s'posen we go home an' talk the thing

over some other time," Jack said with an assumption of cheerfulness which was far from natural.

He had suddenly conceived a plan by which the little woman could be relieved without the pain of deciding that it should be so, and there was no more than sufficient time to put it into execution.

Aunt Nancy walked back to the house in a meditative mood, Jack talking about the cow and kindred topics to prevent her mind from dwelling upon the dreaded subject.

He at once set about doing the chores in an unusually careful manner when they arrived home.

A large quantity of wood was brought into the kitchen, an extra amount of water drawn, and the cow given a generous lunch of clover after she had been driven into the stable.

"Why do you do so much unnecessary work, Jack dear?" Aunt Nancy asked. "There will be nothing left for morning, and it is bad to have 'idle hands.'"

"I may as well fix everything now, for you know what you said about puttin' off till tomorrow. Say, Aunt Nancy, would you lend me a lead pencil an' a piece of paper?"

"Of course, my child. Are you going to write a letter?"

"Yes, Aunt Nancy, an' you shall see it in the mornin'."

"Better sit down at the kitchen table. If writing is as much of a task for you as it is for me, you'll need every possible convenience."

"I had rather do it in my room, for you see I don't know very much about such things, an' it'll come mighty hard, but you won't care if it don't look very nice, will you?"

"Certainly not, my child. It could only annoy me because I have not taken advantage of our leisure time to teach you the little I know."

"You are always blamin' yourself, Aunt Nancy, an' I don't like to hear it. I wouldn't let anybody else talk that way about you."

For reply the little woman patted the boy on the cheek, and then proposed the nightly search for burglars be made.

After the evening devotions Aunt Nancy gave Jack the articles he had asked for, and was considerably surprised by the warmth of the boy's good-night salute.

Once in his room, Jack set about what was for him a formidable task, and it was late before he completed the following:—

"DEAR AUNT NANCY I AM GOIN TO SEA
THE FARMER & TELL HIM YOU R SORRY IF I
DONT COME BACK U WILL NO WHERE I AM
BUT DONT FEL BAD FOUR I LUV U. I CARNT
STOP TO MILK

JACK DUDLEY

"URE JACK DEAR."

When this had been done Jack looked around the little room as if taking leave of all it contained, wiped a suspicious moisture from his eyes, and then dressed, but with his shoes in his hands, crept softly down the stairs.

The ticking of the clock sounded strangely loud and unnatural; the silence, save for this clicking noise, was oppressive, and he felt as if he was about to commit some crime against the woman who had befriended him.

"It's got to be done, an' I mustn't stand here worryin' about it, or I might back out," he said to himself.

It was necessary he should think of Aunt Nancy's self accusations and sorrow before he could nerve himself to raise the window.

He took this method of departing rather than by the door, for he feared the little woman would be alarmed on learning she had remained

in the house a portion of the night without every place of egress being securely fastened.

Once outside he gazed around several moments, taking in all the details of the place where he had spent so many pleasant days, and then, putting on his shoes, he started up the lane with a heart so heavy it seemed a positive burden.

The moon shone faintly through the clouds; the night wind murmured mournfully among the trees, and before him could dimly be seen the road he believed led him to the paupers' home by way of Mr. Pratt's house.

CHAPTER XXI.

STARTLING INFORMATION.

REALIZING that he had a long walk before him, Jack continued on at a steady pace keeping ever in mind the good he hoped to accomplish.

He did not dare dwell upon the possible ending to the journey lest he should grow faint-hearted, but tried to persuade himself there would be some way by which he might escape the threatened ignominy.

By starting at midnight, he expected to arrive at Scarborough early in the day, and then, in case Farmer Pratt did not attempt to detain him, it would be possible to return to the farm before sunset.

It was not believed he would meet any travellers at that hour, and the loneliness, when the shadows danced to and fro athwart the road like fairy-land monsters, was so great as to make him repent ever having attempted the undertaking.

As the curtain of night was slowly removed,

and the heralds of the coming morn appeared in the sky, his drooping spirits revived.

He listened with interest to the sounds which proclaimed that day was awakening. The birds in their leafy homes began to discuss the propriety of going out in search of the "early worm." The frogs from the watery dwellings called to their children that it was time to be up and doing unless they wanted to remain tadpoles forever, and the wind which came "out of the sea" whispered: Awake! it is the day.

The leaves bowed and courtesied, the waving grasses bent yet lower their heads, the flowers brought out their sweetest perfumes, and all nature was quivering with excitement because the kindly sun was about to show himself once more.

Then as the first golden rays of light shot across the sky and the birds burst forth into song, Jack felt a certain sense of relief. The words which he had heard Aunt Nancy speak so often came to his mind, and he repeated over and over again, understanding the meaning better than ever before,—

"He doeth all things well."

It was but a little past eight o'clock when he turned the corner which led to Farmer Pratt's

house, and the first person he saw was none other than Master Tom.

"Hello! Where'd you come from?" that young gentleman cried in surprise.

"Down the road a bit."

"Why didn't you git back before? Father's been lookin' almost everywhere for you an' the baby."

"Is he still huntin'?"

"No, he gave it up as a bad job a good while ago, for there's no chance of gettin' the reward now."

"The reward?" Jack asked in surprise.

"Yes; you see the baby's mother went away from Portland, an' father don't allow there's anybody in town who cares very much about it after so long a time."

"Louis' mother in Portland?" Jack cried, rapidly growing bewildered.

"Of course; father went in to see her after he made up his mind you'd gone away; but she wasn't there, so he said it would pay him better to 'tend to the farm instead of runnin' 'round after you fellers."

Jack's eyes were opened wide with astonishment, and Tom began to think the hunchback had taken leave of his senses.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked sharply, and Jack replied slowly,—

"I can't make out how Mrs. Littlefield happened to be in Portland when the last I saw of her was on the 'Atlanta.' Why, the ship was goin' to Bremen!"

"She come inside the breakwater after you went adrift. It's all in the papers father's got."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" Jack asked reproachfully.

"How could I when we didn't know where you was? Me an' father hunted all 'round, but couldn't find hide nor hair of either you or the baby."

"Was your father tryin' to send us back to Mrs. Littlefield?"

"Sure, 'cause he wanted to earn the reward."

"An' I've been keepin' out of his way when I might have given Louis back to his mother long ago!" Jack cried in dismay.

"You oughter knowed better."

"How could I when he'd threatened to send us to the poor farm?"

"But he didn't."

"He told Aunt Nancy so."

"Who's she?"

"A lady we've been livin' with. Say, Tom,

have you got the papers that tell about Mrs. Littlefield huntin' for us?"

"There's a whole slat of 'em down to the house. Father spent more'n twenty cents buyin' whatever had anything in it about you."

"Will you give me one?"

"Of course. I know they ain't any good, for I heard him say he'd thrown away jest so much money on the pesky things."

"Let's go right down an' get one," Jack cried excitedly as he tried to quicken Tom's movements by pulling at his arm.

Master Pratt was not a boy who could be hurried; he objected to moving quickly upon any occasion, however important, and said irritably,—

"Don't yank a feller 'round so; if I go back now I'm afraid father'll be there an' set me to work."

"I'll help you if he does."

"A feller like you wouldn't 'mount to much haulin' rock-weed," Tom said scornfully.

"But I'll help as much as I can. *Do* go, Tom; only think what it means to Louis! His mother will soon find him if I can take one of the papers back to Aunt Nancy."

"How do you make that out?"

"She'd see where to write to Mrs. Littlefield, an' that would settle the whole thing."

"Well, I'll go," Master Pratt said with an air such as he fancied a martyr should wear; "but it's goin' to be mighty hard if I'm set to work after gettin' so far away from home."

Jack hurried him along as fast as possible, which at the best was a slow pace, and, on arriving at the Pratt farm, Tom reconnoitred several minutes, determined not to enter the house if his father was on the premises.

Mr. Pratt was nowhere to be seen, and Tom whispered,—

"You stay here while I run in an' get it. Mother may be mad if she sees you hangin' 'round after father has blowed us up so much for lettin' you go away."

Jack hid himself behind a clump of hollyhocks, and in a few moments Tom came back with two papers which showed signs of having been subjected to hard usage.

"Put 'em in your pocket, an' let's skip."

Jack was about to act upon this suggestion when it suddenly occurred to him that, in the excitement caused by learning Louis' mother was searching for her child, he had forgotten the reason for his visit.

"I've got to see your father before I leave," he said.

"What for? He won't be very pleasant after losin' all the money the captain's wife was willin' to pay."

"I can't help that. I'm here with a message from Aunt Nancy, an' it must be delivered."

"I guess you'll find him down in the potato patch, but I ain't fool enough to go with you. Hurry up, an' I'll see you on the road, for I reckon you count on goin' back to that Aunt Nancy."

"Of course, an' I must be there as soon as possible."

Tom pointed out the location of the field, and Jack started across the ploughed land feeling very light at heart, because it now seemed probable Louis would soon find his mother.

Farmer Pratt was not aware he had a visitor until Jack had approached within a couple of yards, and said in a voice which was decidedly shaky,—

"Good mornin', sir."

"Hello! It's you, eh?"

"Yes, sir," Jack replied, as if believing the gentleman wished for an answer.

"Well, you young scoundrel, what have you to say for yourself after cheatin' me out of one hundred dollars? Answer me that, you misshapen villain!"

“I didn’t cheat you, sir.”

“Don’t contradict me, you miserable cripple, or as sure’s my name’s Nathan Pratt I’ll strike you with this hoe!”

Jack started back in alarm as the farmer raised the tool, and then, hoping to bring the interview to a speedy close, said timidly,—

“I came here, sir, to tell you that Aunt Nancy is awful sorry she acted a lie when you were at the house huntin’ for us. She can’t be easy in her mind till she’s confessed, an’ as she couldn’t walk so far I’ve come in her place.”

“Is that the little woman up on the Saco road with a couple of curls an’ a mighty sharp tongue?”

“She’s got two curls.”

“I know her! So she lied to me, eh?”

“Not exactly, sir, for you didn’t ask straight out if we were there; but she’s awful good and thinks by not tellin’ everything it was the same as a lie, so I come over here to tell you she’s sorry.”

“So she ought to be, the vixen! The idea of a little drop of vinegar like her keepin’ that baby away from his mother!”

“Did you know, then, that Louis’ mother was huntin’ for him?”

“Of course I did, or else why would I have

gone gallivantin' 'round the country lookin' for him?"

"Then why didn't you tell her? She'd been only too glad to hear from Mrs. Littlefield, but you made her believe we'd got to be took to the poor farm."

The farmer glared at Jack for an instant, and then it flashed across his mind that the cause of his losing the reward was the lie he told to Aunt Nancy.

This was not a consoling thought to one who had mourned so deeply over the loss of the prospective money as had Mr. Pratt, and the only relief he could find was in scolding Jack.

The cripple listened to his angry words a few seconds, and then, knowing no good could come of waiting, said as he walked away,—

"I only came over here to tell you Aunt Nancy was sorry, an' there's no need of stayin' any longer after you know it."

"I'll have her arrested for swindlin' me outer that money!"

"She didn't do anything of the kind, an' it's all your own fault you lost it," Jack cried, emboldened by the knowledge that he was at a safe distance from the angry man.

The farmer shook his fist at the cripple in

impotent rage, and Jack hurried out to the road where Tom was waiting to receive him.

"What was goin' on down there?" Master Pratt asked eagerly. "I heard him hollerin' awful."

"It wasn't much. Your father was kinder mad, but I guess he'll get over it pretty soon."

"I hope so, for he's been scoldin' about losin' the money ever since he first saw the papers. Where are you goin' now?"

"Home."

"Why don't you hold on a while an' get rested?"

"It won't do to stop; Aunt Nancy'll be worryin' about me, an', besides, we've got to send a letter to Louis' mother right away."

Tom insisted that after the service he had rendered it would be nothing more than a friendly act for the cripple to remain and chat a while, but Jack would listen to nothing of the kind.

Despite his weariness he set out on the return journey at once, but with a lighter heart than when he left Aunt Nancy's home.

It was dark when he came down the lane and found the little woman sitting under the old oak.

"O Jack dear!" she cried in tones of mingled

joy and surprise. "It's really you, and that hard-hearted farmer didn't send you to the poor farm. But perhaps you couldn't find him," she added as the thought occurred to her.

"Yes I did, an' I told him you was sorry."

Then Jack related the incidents of his journey, reserving until the last the startling news which promised to restore Louis to his parents' arms.

Aunt Nancy alternately laughed and cried when she heard the story, and at its conclusion said,—

"What a lesson that should be to us, Jack dear. If I hadn't acted the lie Louis would have seen his mother just so much sooner, and I have been the means of making the poor woman's heart ache longer than was necessary. You thought it wasn't a sin because I didn't *speak* the words which formed the falsehood, and yet you can now see that increased trouble has been brought about by it."

"But Mr. Pratt told a reg'lar lie."

"That doesn't excuse me in the slightest. If every person in the world spoke falsely I couldn't plead that it gave me a right to do so. But come into the house and get something to eat. You must be nearly famished as well as tired."

"A slice of bread and butter wouldn't taste bad. Where's Louis?"

"I put him to bed an hour ago," the little woman replied as she led the way in. "After

I set the table I'll read the papers you brought so we can find out what's to be done to let that poor woman know where her baby is."

Jack insisted there was no reason why the table should be laid for him, but Aunt Nancy would not listen to his proposition of taking the food in his hands.

She set out some of the best crockery, and in it placed as tempting a lunch as the most fastidious boy could have asked for.

Then as Jack ate she read the accounts of the accident on board the "Atlanta."

"It doesn't state here where the captain lives," she said after a while, "but I think I know how we can find Mrs. Littlefield. I will write a letter to the editor of the paper asking for her address, or perhaps it would save time to send one to her and get him to address it."

"The last plan is the best," Jack said after some thought.

"Then I'll write at once, and you shall take it to the post office the first thing in the morning."

It was late before the little woman finished what was to her a hard task, and then she thanked her Father for his wondrous goodness and mercy in allowing that her sin brought forth no other evil than the delay in restoring the baby to his mother's arms.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE ARRIVAL.

BRIGHT and early on the following morning Jack set out for the post office with the letter, and Mr. Treat would have resumed the "dicker" for the cow immediately after his arrival, but the hunchback prevented him by saying,—

"I don't want to buy one now. Mrs. Souders gave Aunt Nancy a handsome creature, and that is all she needs."

"Sho! You don't mean to tell me Sarah Souders gave one right out?"

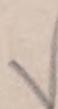
"That's what she did."

"Then all I can say is, it's a case of fool an' her money soon parted. Why shouldn't Aunt Nancy pay for things the same as anybody else?"

"She hadn't the money."

"There's where you make a mistake, for we haven't settled for the wheat yet, an' I've quite a little sum in my hands belongin' to her."

"But that must be used in gettin' ready for the summer boarders."



"Well," Mr. Treat said with a long-drawn sigh, as if pained because he had been prevented from performing a charitable act, "I can't help it if the old woman wants sich a cow as Sarah Souders would buy when she can get a good one from me by puttin' out a little money."

Then the worthy post master took the letter Jack handed him, scrutinized it carefully, asked if Aunt Nancy was thinking of putting an advertisement in the papers for summer boarders, and, on receiving a non-committal answer, finally dropped it in the mail bag.

Jack had waited to see this last act performed, and when the missive disappeared he hurried home.

It so chanced that he did not arrive there as soon as he had expected.

While passing Mr. Dean's house Bill came out and hailed him with,—

"Say, Hunchie, is the old maid waitin' for me to come 'round so she can talk Sunday school?"

"Aunt Nancy doesn't do anything of the kind. If you knowed her as well as I do you'd be mighty glad to be where she was."

"I ain't sayin' that isn't so, an' don't be s'prised if you see me up there pretty soon."

"Shall I tell her so?"

"No, for it might give the old woman too much of a shock. I only thought I'd let you know so's you wouldn't get frightened when I came inter the yard," and with this remark Master Dean re-entered the house, probably thinking he had paved the way in a very delicate manner for a visit to the little woman whom he had so often held up to ridicule.

Now that the important letter had really been sent both Aunt Nancy and Jack were in a nervously expectant frame of mind.

They were unable to decide whether the editor of the newspaper or Mrs. Littlefield would write first, and anxiously they awaited for some tidings.

Jack went to the post office for every mail, and the little woman actually neglected to wipe imaginary specks of dust from the furniture during three whole days.

At the expiration of this time both were startled at seeing Daniel Chick drive up the lane with a strange lady in his wagon.

It was at the close of the afternoon, and the two were sitting under the big oak while Louis nestled snugly in the little woman's arms.

There was no doubt in Aunt Nancy's mind as to who the stranger might be when she leaped

from the carriage, and, seizing the baby in her arms, covered his face with kisses and tears.

"It's the dear little fellow's mother," Aunt Nancy whispered, as she led Jack away, "and it is well to leave her alone for a while. She may be hungry, and we must get supper at once. Send Daniel Chick off while I start the fire."

It was not an easy matter to dismiss the driver of the vehicle.

He had been unable to extract any information from Mrs. Littlefield, and wanted to know why she had come to Aunt Nancy's at least three weeks before the summer boarders should arrive.

"It's the baby's mother, and we want to leave her alone," Jack replied.

"I ain't troublin' of her, am I?" and Mr. Chick crossed one leg over the other as he gazed at the scene.

"No; but Aunt Nancy said you were to go away now," Jack persisted, and then, seeing that the gentleman evinced no disposition to leave, he joined the little woman in the house.

Supper was ready and on the table before Mrs. Littlefield could relinquish the baby long enough to ask Jack for the particulars of his adventures.

Then when she came to the door Aunt Nancy

said, as her ringlets, sharing the feelings of the wearer, shook with suppressed excitement,—

“I hope you will have something to eat. You must be hungry by this time, and Louis shall sit with me while you are at the table.”

As she spoke the little woman held out her hands invitingly to the baby, and he showed every desire to go to her.

“It can be plainly seen that my darling has had a good home,” Mrs. Littlefield replied as she kissed him again and again.

“He has been loved perhaps better than in a house where there were other children; but almost any one would have given him the same treatment.”

“I am afraid not; both he and Jack have been very fortunate. Now I will take a cup of tea, but had rather hold him myself.”

Aunt Nancy beckoned for Jack to be seated although it was not more than two hours since he had eaten supper, and when the little woman’s head was bowed in devotion she fervently thanked her Father for his wondrous goodness and mercy in allowing the mother and child to meet again in this world.

During the meal Mrs. Littlefield asked Jack to tell the story of his wanderings, and he gave them

in detail, not omitting an account of Farmer Pratt's determination to send them to the poor farm.

"I shall never be able to repay you for all you have done, my boy," Louis' mother said feelingly when the cripple concluded. "You are to go back with me, and I will take care that you have a good home."

Jack had nothing to say in regard to this.

It seemed only natural he should remain with Louis after all that had happened, but the idea of leaving the farm was not a pleasant one.

He had known Mrs. Littlefield only during such time as she was on shipboard, and while she had been kind to him it was as nothing compared with what he experienced during his stay with Aunt Nancy.

Very much was said regarding the children's adventures. Aunt Nancy was thanked over and over again for all her kindness, and then Louis' mother intimated that she would like to retire.

"I wish to leave here on the first train to-morrow morning, and have travelled so long that rest seems necessary now."

The little woman conducted her guest to another apartment, and then, with Jack's assistance, the kitchen was made tidy once more.

Louis was nestling in his mother's arms in the lavender-scented bed which Aunt Nancy kept especially for "company," and the little woman and Jack were under the big oak together for what both believed would be the last time.

"You must think sometimes, Jack dear, of the poor old maid who is sitting out here at this same hour wondering where in the big world her boy and baby are."

"There won't come a day or evening, Aunt Nancy, when I sha'n't think of you, and remember you are the best friend I or any other boy ever had. You see I can't say what is in my heart, but if I could you'd know I'd never forget how good you've been to me."

"The little I have done, Jack dear, was only my duty, and you have paid me a thousand fold for everything. I haven't been so contented for many years as since you came here, and but for the wrong committed when Mr. Pratt called I should have been perfectly happy."

"I'm glad you liked me," Jack said half to himself, "for if you hadn't I wouldn't have known what a real home was like. It kinder seems as if I belonged here."

"You *do* act the same as own folks, and I wonder if Mrs. Littlefield will take as much comfort with you as I have?"

"But I'm not goin' to stay at her house very long. When the captain comes home I shall get work on board the 'Atlanta' again. Folks won't keep me for an ornament, you know, an' I must earn my own livin'."

"Do you like to go to sea?"

"Well, there's some things about it that's pleasanter than stayin' ashore. The sailors are kinder than the boys in town, an' don't call me 'Hunchie,' or names of that sort."

Aunt Nancy remained silent, as if in deep thought, several moments, and then said abruptly,—

"You certainly ought to go to school a portion of the time, Jack dear."

"I s'pose I had, for I don't know scarcely anything, an' never had a chance to learn."

"Can you read?"

"If the words ain't too long; but in printin' there are so few short ones, that I don't seem to find out what the man who made it meant."

"I should have taught you instead of sitting here idle; but we couldn't have accomplished a great deal since you came."

"You've had enough to do without botherin' about me."

"But, Jack, you can do a great deal by

yourself. Before you go away I want to give you a little money, and with some of it you must buy a school book. Then study a certain portion of it each day, until there is no difficulty in reading any ordinary print. After that will be time enough to take up other branches, and writing must come with the reading, as I shall look very anxiously for a letter in your own hand."

"I'll do the best I can, Aunt Nancy, but I don't want you to give me any money. You haven't much to spare, and that I know."

"I shall share it with you, Jack dear, and you mustn't make any objection, for after you have gone I shall feel better to know you are able to buy what little you may want."

Then Aunt Nancy drew from her pocket a small black book which she handed to the boy as she said in a low tone,—

"This was my father's Bible, and the print is so faint that I can no longer read it even with glasses."

"Hadn't you rather keep it? It was your father's."

"No, dear. I have one as you know, and this can be put to no better service than teaching you the right way. For my sake, Jack, become a good man. Shun evil company, and do unto

others as you would they should do unto you. I haven't set a very good example in that way since you came here; but you have a better temper than I, and for that more is expected. Don't be tempted to tell a lie, and then you'll never feel as I have since Mr. Pratt called."

"I'll remember all you say, Aunt Nancy, and it would be a mighty ungrateful feller who'd do anything he thought would make you feel bad."

Then ensued another long interval of silence, during which the sun finished his work of painting the clouds, and had sunk behind the hills.

"It'll come pretty hard not to see you at night," Jack finally said thoughtfully.

"Will it, really?" the little woman asked eagerly.

"Of course," and Jack looked up in surprise that such a question should have been asked. "I don't s'pose I'll ever find a home as nice as this."

"And would you be willing to stay here?"

"Indeed I would if I could get work to pay my way."

"Don't you think it would be lonely when winter comes, and you would be obliged to remain a greater portion of the time in the house?"

"Not if you was here."

"Then, Jack, I am going to say something I

thought ought not to be spoken of for fear you might do it simply to please me. Why not stay?"

"But I can't find any work 'round here, Aunt Nancy."

"You have contrived to get plenty from the first night I saw you. If this home seems pleasant there is no reason why you should leave it, and when the white winged messengers come to carry me to the Father, the little I leave behind shall be yours. It isn't much, Jack dear, but would keep you from want, and a delicate boy like you is not able to fight the hard world. If you were strong and well the case would be different."

Jack drew a long breath as if the pleasurable surprise was almost overpowering, and then asked slowly,—

"Do you really want me to live here?"

"Do I want you? If you say you will stay the pain which is now in my heart will go away in an instant, and I would be the happiest old woman in the State."

"Then there'll be two feelin' mighty good, Aunt Nancy, for I'm only too glad of the chance."

The little woman kissed him tenderly, which told better than words that the invitation really came from the heart.

Not until a late hour that night did the tiny woman and the cripple leave the bench under the old oak.

Aunt Nancy had many plans for the future, chief among which was giving Jack an education, and he speculated upon the possibility of tilling so much of the farm during the coming season as would give him a small income.

All this was so interesting that for the first time in her life Aunt Nancy came very near forgetting to search the house for supposed burglars.

"Mercy on us, Jack! It must be near midnight, and we haven't looked into a single room yet. I am so excited I hardly know what I'm about."

"I don't believe there would be any harm done if we didn't search the place for a week," Jack said with a merry laugh; "but we'll go through the motions all the same."

On the following morning there was very little opportunity for a lengthy conversation upon the change in the plans as arranged by Aunt Nancy and Jack.

When she made known the fact that the cripple would remain with her, Mrs. Littlefield approved heartily of it.

"I am positive he couldn't have a better home," she said, "and will take it upon myself to see

he is not a burden. That much I owe him, if nothing more, for all he did to make my baby happy and comfortable."

"I am not a rich woman, Mrs. Littlefield," Aunt Nancy said with considerable dignity, "but I can care for the dear boy while I live."

This concluded the subject, for at that moment Daniel Chick arrived to take the visitor to the station, and Aunt Nancy and Jack could think of nothing save the parting with the little fellow they had learned to love so dearly.

Louis crowed and laughed at the prospect of a ride, and Aunt Nancy said sadly when he disappeared around the corner of the lane,—

"It almost seems as if he was glad to go away from us, Jack dear."

"I reckon the farm will be kinder lonesome for a day or two, but he's with his mother, an' that's where he belongs."

"Yes, dear, we mustn't repine. The day will soon come for me when I go away to my Father, and then you must think the same, for I shall be many times happier in the eternal city than the baby is now. It will be a lonely time for you, Jack dear, but only for a short while, after which the old maid and the cripple will be in the glory and splendor of God's own light."

Then Aunt Nancy kissed Jack affectionately as she drew him to the favorite seat, and, under the old oak where so many happy as well as sad hours have been spent, will we bid adieu to the hunchback and his best earthly friend.

THE END.







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